

SOPHOMORE

A THESIS IN
Creative Writing and Media Arts

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of Missouri-Kansas City in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

by
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SOPHOMORE

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ABSTRACT

This is a collection of flash nonfiction, fiction and poetry. It is intended to speak to the “seconds” of life – the do-over-and-overs, the try-and-try-agains, the get-knocked-down-but-get-back-ups. It is intended to reflect finding and losing and circling back like a vulture. It is intended to depict the frustrating moments when we act against our best judgement. It is intended to be a pretty quick read.

I am not sure that any of the above has been accomplished. But. That’s kinda the point I guess.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Sophomore,” presented by Sara Ashley Perkins, candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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introduction

When I was in high school, my father explained that being a sophomore meant being a “wise moron.” I wasn’t too excited about that. Because it means living in-between – learning, but not learned; working, but not finished; being, but not quite enough. It is gaining new information yet acting according to old thinking. Conditioned thinking. Comfortable thinking. It’s a time when I try and try and fail because I am *just* figuring it out. This is perhaps the most annoying thing about being a sophomore – I typically don’t get to see the forest for the trees or whatever until I’m through it. And even then, I’m probably too tired or too relieved to turn around and look back and actually see what I’ve just gone through.

I was a sophomore in high school when I read *East of Eden* and fell in love with writing. I was a sophomore in my discipleship program when I realized I wanted to be a writer. I was a sophomore in college when I failed my first creative writing class. And when I understood that I’m queer. And when I tried (and failed) to quit drinking for the first time. My sophomore years are marked by shifting perspectives. In undergrad, my writing teacher asked if I had ever read *Jesus’ Son*. I had not. You’d probably like it, he said. It’s similar to your writing. So I did and he was right. (In that I liked it. Denis Johnson writes in and about moments *way* better than me.) I know there are writers who do the things I do, but I don’t read enough to know who a lot of them are. And the ones I’ve read, I don’t remember much of. What I hope to emulate of those I do remember is the brevity of

Lydia Davis, the frankness of Denis Johnson, the relatability of Anne Lamott, the beauty of Gabriel Garcia-Marquez and the joy of Ross Gay. (Okay. I'll admit their books are sitting in front of me right now.) And even of this small sample size, trying to be like them has me lost in some dense foliage.

This is part of why sophomore is the most appropriate title for this. My life has been punctuated by wandering around, thinking I know something until I get smacked by a low hanging branch, and I am struck dumb-founded and nose-bleeding. And then quickly forgetting the sting of that slap and going on my merry way. I thought I wrote to “understand myself” and to “relate to people.” And don't get me wrong, those things are a part of it, but they aren't the point of it. I think (subject to change) the point I strive toward is writing a space where the reader can relate to themselves. Lofty? Very. Pretentious? Extremely. Problem is I don't actually know how to do that.

One of the few things I think I know is that space is distinguished by the “structure” that surrounds it – I roughly recognize that I am in a house right now based on the walls and windows that contain it. Another way I understand space is by what's in it. I know a forest because of the trees, a desert because of its lack of trees, a church by its stained glass, a park by its swings, a store by its products – you get it. I say this because something I learned in this program is that I can create and manipulate the space of a story by experimenting with its structure. The story “sixtieth” is an experiment in perspective – how do I convey an intimate family experience without being too close to

any the characters? While “landing” and “flying” are experiments in syntax – how do I convey the feeling of mashed up time? Can one sentence be a story? And perhaps obviously, the flash, like “relationship of inanimate objects” and “psychic party” are an experiment in characterization - how much information do you need to know a someone? Can a moment be a story?

I didn't understand the value of “sophomore” until writing this intro. That's not to say I hadn't thought of it. I had. I originally thought this was going to be stories from the second years of my life – the second year of high school, the second year of college, the *second* second year of college, and on and on. It's a pretty contrived concept. And I thought it would be so clever to call the first thing I published a second thing. And I thought that cleverness would make me famous. I also thought I wanted to be in an MFA program for structure and deadlines because I lack discipline. I've thought a lot of things that ended up not making much sense. I used to think that I would be better at living and writing if I had all the *why's* – if I had all the necessary and pertinent information, then I would be able to do the damn thing perfectly from the start. But I'll never gain information without doing. *How* the sophomore struggle. *How* is trying with limited information and not knowing the result. It's playing into discovery.

Thankfully almost everything in my life has turned out different than I anticipated. Turns out I needed to be in this program to meet other people who think and feel like me, to show me how to do what I am afraid of because left to my own devices, I'd just stay

sitting on the ground in the forest, watching bugs. The people I have walked through this program with have shown me *how* – how to try, how to keep going through when I get stuck and discouraged. They have sat with me and listened to me whine about the dirt and the heat and the decaying leaves and all the real and imaginary reasons I can't and won't. I have made my way through this terrible metaphor by their guidance, passion, hope and love. And it is this wisdom that I cling to even as I stumble over rocks and branches on this mountain I will forever climb.

*for Whitney,
who said this was a silly idea*

part one

Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter.

Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.

- *Samuel Beckett*

here and there

It is exactly 5:47 PM on Tuesday evening when Emma Trennen realizes she has left the bus. Well, that's not exactly right. Her body has left, being attracted to the sparkly shoes of a young woman sitting in front of her. She follows her out at Market and Sixth, leaving her head tucked under the fourth-row seat of the Main Metro transit in a backpack made to carry cats.

But they planned for this. Emma (at least Emma's head) knew that sooner or later her body would likely follow something or someone off the bus because the body was, after all, a fickle thing, full of troublesome yearnings and misleading passions. The woman's gold-tasseled shoes were enough of a distraction. So, in the inevitable event they became separated, the body was to wait at the stop until the bus double backed on its route. If somehow it was the other way around – if, for instance, someone accidentally picked up the bag which contain her head thinking it was theirs - Emma (that is, her body) was to get off the bus and just go home. They counted the steps every morning and every evening so that the way back would be muscle memory.

The bus turns and the backpack slides into a man's crossed oxfords. He is wearing socks with bananas and "peanut butter jelly time" stitched across them. He repositions, revealing dirty gum stuck on the bottom of his shoe.

The one thing they didn't plan for was distance. Though they are detached, there is still a connection between them, but that connection has, up to this point, only been measurable within the walls of their apartment. With this amount of space between them,

Emma (Emma's head anyway) worries that her body will crash like a RC airplane out of range of its transmitter. But then, maybe not. Turns out her head's relationship to her body is stronger now than it has been in years. Because now she doesn't have to sort through the reactions of her body, allowing her to really think. And that makes it easier - makes her better - at directing her body. If there is something the body feels, her head no longer knows it or refuses to acknowledge it.

Emma (rather, Emma's body) also feels that the detachment has been good for them. By no longer being physically connected to her head, she is no longer riddled with her anxieties or memories. She is, for the first time in years, able to act on impulses her head has been too afraid to explore, like doing yoga naked in the living room or waking in the park barefoot. Her head still chastises her, but her body finds it easier to dismiss. Her body has the same general needs, like eating and they have adapted, switching a liquid diet since the food being masticated by the head can no longer travel into the body. Lots of green protein shakes through a straw directly into the esophagus. Going to the bathroom and sleeping are the same as they were before.

There was a lot of tripping in the beginning. If Emma (her head this time) was left on the couch or the bed or the bookshelf while the body tried to clean dishes or do laundry or move generally, the body usually ended up chest down on the ottoman or on the floor or in a closet. Their solution came in the cat backpack. They bought it long ago thinking the cat would love the chance to see the outdoors. He hadn't and died a few months after they got it. Her body wept. Her head felt nothing.

The bus glides to a stop. A pleasant, automated female voice chimes. *Market.*

And. Grand. The bus will turn around soon.

The backpack allows for Emma's head to be carried like a baby. It is especially useful in public, as the mesh siding allows Emma to see while concealing the fact that her body is carrying a decapitated human head on her chest. Also useful is the Styrofoam bust they attached to her shoulders. They originally tried to reattach her actual head, but it was like trying to put the same sides of two magnets together. So they painted the Styrofoam, put some tortoise-shell sunglasses and a wig on it, attached it with straps under her armpits and wore hoodies as much as they could. No one really notices, except for children.

The whole issue of talking is surprisingly easy. Emma (her head again) initially thought it would be harder, since she needs to be in the immediate presence of her body to speak. But considering so many interactions are done through technology – for instance, every store now has self-checkout – she finds she speaks very little throughout the day. Even at work, she keeps the backpack on her desk and her fake head down, so her voice always sounds like it's coming from the appropriate direction.

“Why though? I already told her I ain't goin.” *She stupid.* “What she doin out here fucking talkin behind my back?” *You right.* A woman yells at her phone, garnering support from the speaker. Someone pushes air out of their nose in frustration.

When they first became detached, her head hadn't thought too much about it. Not that she hadn't been concerned, but if she was being honest, she sort of saw it coming. She felt (her body did anyway) a distance between them, growing slowly for years. It was not an intentional or malicious thing. It was just a product of time, like growing older.

For years, her head had analyzed and over-analyzed every action, every feeling, every desire of her body. She would berate the body for wanting sex, food, adventure, work, sleep, help – anything. She was tired. Eventually, they just stopped talking. So it wasn't a surprise when her head fell off one night while she was brushing her teeth. The actual detachment happened quickly. Her head tilted just a bit too far to the right and her shoulder felt her ear and then her forehead smacked the counter before landing with a heavy thud on the linoleum. Her head was nearly impaled on her toothbrush. Her body slumped slowly to the floor. Crumpled really. Like a sack of dirty laundry. Or an imploding building.

And they stayed like that for two days. Her body, having been told every day to act differently than she felt, finally rested. Her head, thrust into a new anxiety, stayed up working out solutions to every possible scenario she thought they might find themselves in. When her body finally stirred, like a recharged animatronic puppet, she walked away to find something to eat and didn't return to the bathroom until the head demanded to be picked up like a child.

Emma (her head again) feels a bruise forming above her left temple from where she is hitting the floor as the bus bounces over divots in the asphalt. A tear slowly runs down her cheek. She wants to laugh. The ridiculousness of being here, on the floor of a bus, sliding over dry urine and still sticky spilled soda, just a piece of trash that will be cleaned tonight when the bus returns to the garage. She'll be discovered, a head in a backpack made for cats, still alive through some dark voodoo magic and turned into the police, who, not knowing what to do other than assume she is evidence of a murder, will

begin searching for a headless body in a ditch somewhere. But her body will be safely home, lying on the couch, drinking a kale smoothie.

The bus stops abruptly and Emma slams into someone's legs. A foot kicks her slightly backward. The mechanical woman's voice rings. *Market. And. Sixth.* The sliding doors creak open and the exhaust of the hydraulics *pffffffffft.*

Hurried footsteps. Bags being dragged across the floor.

"Hey man! Watch it!"

"What the fuck is this person doing?"

Scrambling and clanking metal.

"Bus Driver? Excuse me Bus Driver?"

"Sir! Ma'am! You need to stop pushing people. I've called the transit authority and—"

Something heavy hits something hard.

"Jesus, is he okay? Should we help him up?"

"Drunk asshole."

The shuffling gets louder, closer. Something plastic cracks. Tortoise-shell sunglasses slide in front of Emma's head.

"Damn bro. Your face is busted."

"If you do not get off this bus *right now*, imma call the cops! You need to *go!*"

Emma's head feels a quick yank across the floor and then upward movement and a floating sensation and then the warmth of sunlight.

picture-perfect

I am running. It is hot. I can feel the sand burning through the soles of my shoes. Wait. I'm barefoot. Where are my shoes? I look back. Maybe I took them off when I got here. But how did I get here? My legs feels sore, full of lactic acid. I need to stop, to stretch and release the tension that is building in my quads. How long have I been running? I look up at the sky. The sun is small. It's only going to get hotter.

Running in loose sand is like being a baby giraffe. Your foot makes contact with the ground and then just sort of... keeps going in some direction. My legs feel like they've been moving at this improbable speed for days and yet I am still upright, moving forward.

People have this idea of the desert, from pictures I guess, of pristine red-orange sand stretching in soft dunes to the horizon line, where it meets the most expansive cerulean sky that deepens as you scan upward, punctuated by these white, wispy marshmallow fluff clouds. A fucking postcard. A Barbie Dream House mirage. Desert sand is an uninteresting gray-beigy color that looks like crushed wheat? Old oatmeal? Punctuated by pieces of broken tumbleweed and yucca bark, weathered bits of Mexican candy wrappers, In-N-Out cups and flattened plastic bottle caps. And it goes on forever in all directions—an ocean of dirty tan. But the sky is that blue. It's quite condescending actually. It's not fair how small and inadequate it can make you feel.

I don't really think people realize how subtle the sand is; how quietly it can move. It sneaks in through the door jam after you let in a friend. It hitchhikes in your ears and

on your clothes as you move from class to class to work to church. It crawls through your window screen while you're sleeping on a cool autumn night. It is cigarette smoke; permeating all surfaces without anyone noticing until one day you wake up to find all of the sand from all of the deserts is in your living room.

It is so hot. I remember watching a film in class from National Geographic of people walking across hot coals. Everyone was amazed because, "How can they do that?" And "They must have thick skin so their feet don't burn." And on and on and all that pretend wonder we give things we don't really care about. What people don't realize is that their feet do burn. The trick is not to *not* burn but to keep going even though it burns. Keep going until the pain numbs out. Or maybe people *do* realize that. Maybe what they're trying to do with all their ooo's and aaaahhh's is distance themselves from the fact that they aren't the type to keep going. They'll always know they're walking on coals so they just... wonder at what they'll never do.

My sweat is evaporating quickly, leaving behind crystalized salt that clings to the hairs of my arms. I lick it off and keep running. Like the sand isn't getting deeper; like my legs aren't starting to bend out more; like my feet aren't forming blisters that pop instantly, exposing new skin to the grainy hot sand. The sky looks down on me. I look back at it and lifting my mouth to say something. And just as I start to feel everything numb out, the ground opens up and swallows me like Jonah.

vacation bible school

All church bathrooms smell the same. Light. Vaguely floral. Like a dusty bowl of crunchy potpourri that's sat out too long. And old lady farts. Years of discreet wind-passing cling to the walls, the tile grout, the fake philodendrons that sit in an over-sized vase on the sink counter. Ashley knows they all smell like this because of the little plastic cone freshener with the scented pink jelly center. She sees them in every church bathroom she's goes in. And only in church bathrooms.

She looks at herself in the mirror and pulls her long blonde hair into a loose high bun. She slides a short black wig over her head like a swim cap, tucking loose strands of hair under the rough nylon. She leans forward and draws brown freckles on her face with an eyebrow pencil from a bag of stage makeup she borrowed from her mother. She counts each one, making sure there are eight on each side. Then eyeliner to black out a few of her teeth. She looks at the sponges and the face paint and thinks about giving herself a beard. She takes a step back and moves her head from side to side to examine her work. She unhooks one of the straps of her overalls. And then rehooks it. She used a compression bandage to strap down her breasts and the flatness of her chest makes her look like a boy.

Because this next week, she will be a boy. Billie, a redneck stuck in quicksand for the kindergarten to second grade kids at Vacation Bible School. The casting choice was a practical one. She is the youngest and smallest of the acting group and considering whoever plays Billie will have to inch themselves lower each day in faux pit they

constructed out of styrofoam and newspaper and plastic sheeting, it made sense. Plus, she is the only one who doesn't mind dressing up like a boy.

She grabs her gym bag and regular clothes and the makeup bag and goes to her father's office down the long wide hall to stash her stuff. The church is quiet on this Friday afternoon. The soft echo of the worship band practicing *Open the eyes of my heart Lord, Open the eyes of my heart, I want to see you, I want to see you...* rings through the halls. Her father is not in his office. He's probably in the sanctuary working with the band, or rehearsing his own performance for Sunday, or helping the head pastor craft his sermon.

She walks upstairs, looking out the floor to ceiling windows at the khaki sea of sand that surrounds the church. Two years ago, a fancy tennis stadium was built caddy-corner to the church. It's lack of alignment bothered Ashley. The church rented it out for its Easter service a few months ago. 25,000 people came. Josh Groban sang "Amazing Grace." Ashley sweated in a pastel pink dress because her mother refused the church's offer to let them have an air conditioned box seat. Even in March, the desert is oppressive.

She enters the high school youth group room where the moms who run VBS have transformed the stage into what people who have never left the California desert think the Appalachian back country looks like. It reminds Ashley of Splash Mountain. Minus the creepy animatronic animals.

"Ashley ohmygoodness you look amazing!" Janice, the mom in charge of the mom's, gives her a hug. "Are you so excited? I am so excited."

The scent of Bath and Body Works Sweet Pea body spray overwhelms Ashley.

“Yeah I’m glad I can help.”

They walk toward the stage. “Well you know how this works. And I just have to say, I am so grateful that you’re doing this. Because, if not for you, it was gonna be me and my bad knees or Lynda and her bad back.”

Ashley nods in faux understanding.

Janice raises her eyebrows. “Do you have all your lines memorized?”

They sit on the edge of the stage. Ashley is watching people set up chairs for the weekend. “Almost. I feel good about the first couple days. I plan on refreshing the night before.”

“You are just so organized and detailed. I wish my Amanda was like you. I’m lucky if I can get her to pick up her clothes.”

She hates that moms use her as a measuring stick. A woman once asked her if she ever had a boyfriend. She lied and said yes. The woman was so happy she almost cried. “If you can be a tomboy and have a boyfriend, then my daughter can too.”

Janice stands. “Lynda’s on her way by the way. She’s just, you know, got the boys and practice...” She starts to walk to the kitchen. “You want something from the snack bar?”

“I don’t have any money.” Ashley rolls up her pant legs.

“That’s okay. I got it.”

“Um, okay... I’ll take Cactus Cooler if got it please and thank you.”

Janice gives her a thumbs up. Ashley stands and looks at the hole she will slowly

sink into.

a church service

Ashley sees Ben come in the double doors of the high school Sunday school room and goes to give him a hug. As she tucks her shoulder under his armpit, she feels something hard against his side.

“You feel that?”

She knows exactly what it is without him saying.

“Dude? Why? Isn’t that like, illegal to have in here anyway?”

“Not for me. I got licensed this weekend in Vegas. Did the whole three-day training...” He looks at her like she just kicked his puppy. “I know what I’m doing. I’m probably the safest person you can be around with one of these right now.”

Acoustic rock is playing overhead.

There’s a hint of sarcasm in Ashley’s tone. “Really took today’s message to heart, huh?”

He shrugs and smiles slightly. “Coincidence. So what’d you talk about up here?”

Ashley rolls her eyes. “Another Columbine talk. This time on Cassie Bernal.” She grips her heart dramatically. “Would you say yes?”

Ben raises an eyebrow. “Well? Would you?”

Ashley lets out a weighted sigh. “You know, it’s been like three freaking years, I’m getting a little tired of this question. Like everyone wants to sound like a freaking martyr — ‘Of course I’d say yes!’— and it’s like no you don’t. Nobody actually knows what they would say when a gun is pointed in their face.”

Ben reaches into his jacket. “We can do a little experiment if you want...”

“That’s not funny.” Ashley takes a moment before continuing. “All I’m saying is that I don’t think it’s fair to base someone’s devotion to God solely on the fact that they got their head blown off because they said they believed in Jesus—“

“Geez, Ash. A bit harsh?”

“I’m not—I’m not saying she deserved it.”

She can tell this is going the way it usually does, so she stops talking. She looks at the floor, tracing the knotty navy and tan gridded carpet with her eyes until she loses track of it. She think about her house and how two of them could fit inside this one room. A couple of the youth leaders are stacking chairs in sixes. When she was little, after they had gathered all the stacks to one side of the sanctuary, she and her sister would pretend the openings under the chairs made a tunnel to a secret hideout. They would crawl around all afternoon while their dad rehearsed.

Ben breaks the silence. “You coming to lunch?”

“Where you going?” They start walking out.

“Dunno. Ley wants sushi—”

Ashely laughed. “Always.” Ley is Ashley’s best friend. And she loves sushi more than people.

“—but I think someone mentioned Islands too so... I dunno.”

“Okay. I gotta find my sister and my parents, but it’ll probably be fine. You guys going like right now right now or like... in a bit?” Ashely stops at the top of the stairs as Ben starts down.

“Probably in a bit. I’m going to find the sisters and see what the plan is so there’s no rush.”

“Alright see ya.”

Ashely walks back to the middle school youth group room. Bouncy ska spills out through the doors. She finds her sister, Danielle, sitting by herself watching some boys in baggy pants play fooseball.

“Hey.”

Danielle keeps watching the boys. “Where have you been?”

“I was talking with Ben. Sorry. You ready?”

Danielle looks at Ashley, stands and picks up her sweater and Bible and puts her purse on her shoulder.

“Why do you even have a purse? What do you need to carry anyway?”

“Actually, I have things.” Danielle unzips the hamster sized purse and looks inside. “Lip gloss, a pen, a couple bucks for snacks...”

“Why don’t you go downstairs for donuts? Or go to the green room for muffins?”

“Sometimes I want sour straws or popcorn...” Danielle looks down and zips up her purse slowly.

Ashley watches her sister in her pink and purple pencil skirt and platform sandals as they walk down the back steps of the church to the toddler area. It’s not a good look for Ashely but it works for her sister. Makes her look older than thirteen. She remembers her at two years old with hands too small to hold onto a plastic easter egg. Ashely can see she’s starting to lose her round Cabbage Patch doll face.

“I think it’s kind of pointless actually. To have a purse.” It comes out sharper than Ashley intends.

Danielle keeps staring at her feet. “You seen mom and dad yet?”

“No. I told you. I talked with Ben and then I came to get you. Dad’s probably backstage and mom’s probably in the kitchen.”

“I thought she was doing the nursery this week?”

They get to the first floor and are met with a cacophony of high pitched squeals.

“I don’t know. We can check there first if you want. Do you know which one?”

“I think she said the two- to three-year-olds.”

They walk down a colorful muralled hall, punctuated with a half dozen half doors where smiling, manicured women stand taking tickets or children from other smiling, manicured women. An exchanging of coats at a musical called, “Billy! Where are your shoes?” And “Sarah stop pulling up your dress!” And most commonly, “What did I just say!?”

The sisters get to the two to three year old half door and find a ticket-taker woman struggling to put a sock on a wriggling, whiny blonde boy.

“Hey Joyce, you seen our mom?”

Joyce has the face of someone who should be fat, but isn’t.

She looks up. “Oh hi girls. No. I think she went to find James. Have you been to the sanctuary?”

The boy flails himself onto his stomach and crawls out of Joyce’s grasp with the sock half hanging on his foot.

“Not yet. Thanks.”

Joyce pauses to catch her breath before she attempts to wrangle the boy again.

“Oh hey, congratulations. Your mom said you made varsity this year.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

She forgets the boy momentarily and comes to the door ledge. “You know Tyler does cross country.” Ashley pulls her lips into a tight smile.

“Maybe you two could talk about it?”

Ashley grabs her sister's hand and turns to leave. “Mmm, that’s a good idea.”

Danielle waves as her sister pulls her away. “See you later Joyce.”

Ashley opens the door to the backstage offices and drops her sister's hand.

“What was that about?”

“Too obvious?”

Danielle scrunches her face and pinches her thumb and forefinger together.

“It’s not my fault he’s gross.”

The girls each grab a quarter of a muffin and a handful of grapes off a plate left on a piano and head onto the stage.

“What makes him gross? He seems fine to—”

“He eats his boogers. Like not just as a little kid. Like still.”

Magenta and yellow light flood the stage as the tech guys unplug and wrap cords to the beat of poppy worship music. Their father is stage left talking with a small group of mostly elderly women.

“Go see if mom’s in the kitchen and I’ll stay with dad. Come back here if you

don't find her."

Danielle leaves as Ashley walks up quietly behind her dad and puts her hand in his. He gives it a quick double squeeze, the silent acknowledgement a sort of code between the two of them. One squeeze for "Not now." Two for "Hello." Three for "We need to go." He doesn't take his attention away from the person he talking to.

"—just a really beautiful song. Thank you so much. You have such a beautiful voice, Pastor James."

"Well, thank you. Really it's Aaron that you should be thanking. He's done an amazing job revamping the arrangements. It's been really great having him here."

A small blue-haired woman steps forward and takes his hand. She leans in to kiss him on the cheek. He bends down to allow it and she gently pats his hand.

"This is my daughter, Ashely."

Ashely is met with the typical exclamations and questions. "Oh how beautiful you are." "Are you the oldest?" "So you're a junior?" "Where are you planning to go to college?" "What will you study?" "There's still time." "We just adore your father."

Ashley can feel the muffin she just ate trying to make it's way back up. She swallows hard.

"It was so nice to meet you." The old lady shuffles away from Ashley as her mother, Lynn, and sister walk up. Her mom is hopping.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm a little JoJo bunny coming to get you!" Her mother nuzzles her face into Ashley's arm as she gives her a hug.

“Poor JoJo bunny. Just couldn’t stay in the backyard. He just had to be free...”

Her mother looks up at her. “I’m sorry we never poured concrete under that gate.”

“Mom, I told you, it’s okay.”

“I know. And JoJo is too. Probably off somewhere with his little bunny friends.”

Ashley scoffs. “We both know that he probably got eaten by a coyote.”

Danielle, who has been mindlessly walking up and down the railing of the handicap ramp for the past few minutes, sighs. “Can we go?”

Lynn holds her hand out to her. “Yes honey, we’re going right now.”

“Actually I was wondering if I could go to lunch with Ben and Ashley and the Patersons and everyone...”

“I don’t see why not. Where are you going?”

“I think Islands. Or maybe sushi at the River. I’m not sure. It’s one of those two.”

“Who’s taking you?”

Danielle goes back to meandering up and down the ramp while Ashley is being interrogated.

“Probably Jen. I dunno. I haven’t seen any of them yet so I don’t know.”

James finishes with his patrons and walks over to them, leaning down and kisses Ashley on the top of the head. “I have to get something from the office.” And he walks away.

“Who’s bringing you home?”

“Mom! It’s fine. You know everyone who’s going. If something happens, I’ll find a cell phone and call you.”

“Okay. You need money?”

“Yeah.”

She takes out her wallet, which also operates as a to-go planner, the travel-size version of the black book that dictates her life, and hands Ashley a twenty. Ashley turns and quickly walks away.

“Take your sister!”

She stops and turns back to her mother with the look of a wounded soldier. Like a cartoon that just took one giant step, Danielle appears next to her, looking at her as if Ashley were about to put a very small, very fluffy animal into a blender.

Ashley stares back at her and shrugs helplessly. “There’s not enough room.”

“Yes there is. There’s enough people going that someone can take you both.”

Ashley rolls her eyes and leaves with her sister hopping after her.

god complex

Here, I felt I started to carry You.

Palms up in hope. Hello? God,

I don't know who I am anymore.

Ghost-fingered – empty-handed –

A trumpet song resounding down
a city street. O angels! Rejoice

A cicada skin stuck on shirt sleeve.

A skeleton seeking its muscle.

A second coming echoing behind
a cloud of dust, a pillar of fire.

Burnt-fingered – whole-handed –

I am here, holding the hem,

offering a way up, out of a hole.

I feel you lift me shoulders-high to hear.

frank

She hits the space bar. Blue hued light illuminates her face.

h o w

d o y o u

k i l l

a n

e l e p h a n t

She's embarrassed that she still types with her index fingers.

Lions, Google says. Tigers. And most frighteningly – other elephants. Google leads her to an essay by George Orwell. Tells her how to survive an elephant attack. Gives her a link to the book, “How to Kill an Elephant: Eighteen Months to Save the Planet.” Informs her that elephants were once used as capital punishment in Southeast Asia. Shows her a video of the president of the NRA being unable to kill an elephant after wounding it in a recent hunt. People want to know ‘if an AK can kill an elephant?’ Yes, Google says. But a 375-caliber rifle is recommended.

She rubs her eyes. It's late. The laptop is making her lap warm as she leans back in the La-Z-Boy her dad used to nap in in a house her parents used to live in that has since been passed down to her. A gray rope of a tail pats her on the head.

“Frank. Stop.” She brushes his tail away. He lets out a quiet high C whine.

Frank is a ten-foot-tall, 11,000-pound African Bush elephant. She's not really sure about the weight. She looked it up online once and figured since he doesn't eat as much

as he should, 11,000 was a good guess. She found Frank when she was seven. She remembers it was the first and only time she went to the principal's office. Kaitlyn had poked her butt while they were lined up for the class picture, so she had slapped her. Kaitlyn cried because it had hurt. She cried because she was scared. She tried to explain to the teacher but she didn't have the words. The picture was never taken.

Frank was in the wood chips at recess. There was a space under the slide with three plastic walls and little bubble windows that reminded her of the pictures of submarines she had seen in the Childcraft books she got the year before. She would pretend to be diving deeper and deeper underwater, in search of new life. The wood chips rustled. She saw his head sticking out and thought he was a plastic toy, but then he flapped his ears. She picked him up. He was so small, he fit in one of her hands. She kept him in her fanny pack and fed him mini Ritz peanut butter crackers for the rest of the day.

That was thirty years ago. Thirty years of trying to hide him – in pockets and plastic easter eggs and suitcases and storage sheds – so people would think she's normal. Thirty years of showing him off – a trophy, a baby blanket, a scar – so that people would think she's different. Thirty years collecting twigs and leaves and any other loose green thing she could shove in the bed of a truck to sustain him. Thirty years of shoveling his oversized rabbit shit and mopping up his urine and scrubbing his hard but still sensitive skin.

She is tired. She closes the laptop and sets it on the TV tray next to the chair. She pulls a blanket over Frank, kisses him on the head and settles into the soft space behind his ear to sleep.

It is cold and she rubs her arms as she walks down the bedding aisle in Walmart. She is lost. Plastic crinkles as she leans her head against a down alternative pillow. She takes a deep breath. She doesn't want to be here. She doesn't want to do this. But she doesn't know what else to do.

She makes her way to the perimeter of the store, looking down every aisle for a sign that says SPORTS & OUTDOORS. There. The guns are in the back corner past the basketballs and bicycles. She doesn't see anyone at the counter and walks up to a wall where multiple rifles are mounted. Her father had hung a stag head up in the basement and told people he shot it his first-time hunting. Lucky shot, he said. He actually bought it from a friend who went hunting regularly. He mounted two decorative rifles from a costume shop next to it. She hated how it looked down on her.

“Can I help you?”

A boy who looks about fifteen stares at her impatiently. His hair is mousey-blonde. The soft parts of his cheeks are pot-marked with acne scars. He sniffs. She shivers.

“I'm... looking for a gun.”

“I figured that ma'am. What kind you lookin for?”

She looks down at the boxes of bullets in the glass counter display. “I need a 485-caliber.”

“Sweet Jesus what you tryin to kill? An elephant?”

She looks at him squarely. “Yes.”

He blinks and puffs air out of his ruddy cheeks. “Well... Okay... First-off, I’m not really even sure I get what you mean by ‘485-caliber.’ I’m assuming you’re looking for something like a bolt-action rifle that can hold that size cartridge? And second-off, we don’t got those here.”

Goddammit.

He leans against the wall with his thumbs in his belt loops, sucking his teeth like he’s an extra in a Western movie. “Something like that... you’re probably gonna need to order and have shipped to an FFL, where you’ll have to fill out a 4473 and get a background. Or, you could see what Bill’s got up at his place in Littlefield.”

“Okay well... Thanks anyway.” She turns to leave, blinking away tears.

“I mean, we got decent hunting gear though. Stuff for field dressin. Bill marks up that shit like crazy. Pretty cheap here.”

She doesn’t look back. “I’m good thanks.”

She walks quickly with her arms crossed past tents and coolers and remembers she needs lotion. She decides to get some Sour Patch Kids too. Frank likes the green ones.

—

“I’d like to buy an E.”

“Nooo sorry. There are no E’s in this one. Cassie, your turn.”

She picks up a takeout container and picks through her chicken lo mein. Frank is lying across the floor, his head toward the TV, flopping his trunk against the carpet like a cat tail. She had to move all the furniture out about five years ago when Frank went

through a growth spurt. He couldn't stand anymore and she wanted him to at least be able to stretch out while lying down. The only thing that remains is the La-Z-Boy and the TV tray. The television had to be mounted to the wall. The clicking wheel on the screen slows to a stop.

"Two hundred."

"C?"

"Yeah looks like there are two C's up there."

"Frank finish eating."

He raises his head and searches the takeout with his trunk.

"No Frank. That's mine. Eat yours."

He huffs air in her face and defiantly begins to scoop leaves and hay into his mouth.

"Can I buy a vowel? I?"

"You sure can. There's one I."

She scrapes her chopsticks against the bottom of the container, trying to pinch out the last noodle. She misses the kitchen. She misses her bed. She misses friends coming over to play shit like Settlers and Apples to Apples. She misses her mother. The television clicks again.

"Ooo nice spin. Five thousand."

She drops the takeout box on the floor. "H."

"L."

"No. No L's I'm afraid. Greg?"

“Dumb.”

Her mother left when she was thirteen. Frank had started to take up more space and since it was becoming more difficult for him to move, just stayed in the middle of the living room most days. Her mother simply packed a suitcase and left a note in the kitchen explaining there was meatloaf in the freezer that just needed to be defrosted and reheated in the oven at 375 degrees for when she got hungry. Her mother didn't even come back after her father died. He had been drunk. Ran a red light. Hit a family turning left head on. They had been driving home after a piano recital. The other father died instantly. The other mother at the hospital. She cried when she heard the two kids survived. Her father's family had asked her to clean out the basement and sort his belongings. She refused to go down there. No one came to claim anything. A slide whistle drops.

“Oh no. Don't look Greg. The news is bad. I'm sorry. Your turn Brenda.”

“Jesus Frank. Give a girl a warning next time.”

He whines without concern. She opens the front door and grabs the shovel she keeps in the planter, scoops up the poop and sprinkles it around the base of the viburnum. Their blossoms are particularly large this year. She takes a bottle of Nature's Miracle Advanced Formula Just for Cats and a roll of paper towels and starts to clean the floor. She is grateful the entryway is tile.

“Six huindred.”

“T.”

“Yeah there are some T's up there. Three to be exact.”

Once when she was sixteen, she rode Frank to a party at her friend Melony's

house. He crushed most of the plants in the backyard and knocked over a sculpture with his ear when he put his head through the open sliding glass door to try a grab some chips off the counter. She was drunk and didn't care. It had felt good to be "the girl with the elephant." – to be looked at like that. Later when Grant, a boy a year younger than her with too many freckles and gray eyes, tried to put his hand up her skirt as she put her tongue down his throat, Frank wrapped his trunk around his waist and flung him into the bushes.

"You can spin again if you want to or you can solve this song title..."

"I'd like to solve it."

She doesn't look up as she scrubs the grout. "Can't Touch This."

"Can't Touch This."

Pat Sajak and the audience congratulate them both.

—

She gets to Bill's shop just after it opens. The day is gray and there is a slight breeze that makes a Confederate flag flap softly. Two wood-carved and painted men hold up the awning with a sign reading "Bill's Bait, Bullets and Bologna." One grips a cast fishing rod and the other has a rifle against his shoulder.

The gravel crunches under her feet. She looks back at the car. It's too late. She already purchased the gun and had it sent here. Not picking it up would be throwing away a thousand dollars. She takes a quick breath and opens the door.

A bell clinks in time with a country song quietly playing overhead. Low florescent lights illuminate rows of shelves holding dusty tackle boxes and bobbers. Jars

of bait and glittering lures. Waders and windbreakers hang off to the side. Wood paneling wraps around the store. It reminds her of the basement. It smells sour – like a dirty mop.

“You the remy?”

Her father – no, just a man – looks at her eagerly. His horseshoe hair is cut close to his scalp and he has a trim mustache. He looks like an Army sergeant turned soccer coach.

“Huh?”

“You the one who ordered the Remington 700 XCR II?”

“Oh, uh, yeah, I—How’d you know?”

He looks like she just slapped him across the face and laughs skeptically. “Well, I don’t get a lot of deer guns through here and I ain’t never seen you before, so... two and two.” He runs his tongue over his molars.

“Right.” She looks down. Boxes and boxes of bullets sit on green felt.

He’s rummaging through a file cabinet with his back to her. “Now before I give you the gun, imma need you to fill out this form” – he slaps a sheet of paper down on the counter and stretches for a pen on the desk behind him – “and do a background check. You got ID and proof of residency?”

She nods, pulling out an envelope from her purse containing a bank statement and her license and hands it to him. His fingers brush against the soft of her palm as he takes it.

Her father had let her watch TV down in the basement on the weekends her mother worked twelves. It smelled wet – musty. Old mildewed carpet and skin-heavy

couch cushions mixed with stale Schlitz and spat Copenhagen. She would sit on his lap watching as Elmer Fudd tried and failed to capture Bugs Bunny. His legs bouncing her up and down. His oversized hands wrapping around the tops of her small thighs, fingers moving under the hem of her Minnie Mouse shorts. An indecipherable pressure on her lower back. The deer head staring out into an invisible distance. Her father sniffed and wiped his face – kissed the top of her head. Their special together time, he said. A time that made her scared.

“Miss, is everything alright?”

She is sitting against a display case, clutching her purse to her chest, staring at an oil stain on the cement floor. “Frank.”

“No miss. I’m Bill. The owner of this store.”

She blinks at him. “What?”

“I’m Bill, the owner? You needa sandwich?”

“Um... No. No I’m fine.” Her face is blank.

“Alright. Well let’s get you up then.”

He extends his hand to help her. She pushes against the glass until she is up on her feet. He rubs his hands together and moves back behind the counter like a used car salesman ready to close a deal.

“Great. Let’s get this paperwork finished and get you on your way then. Your background check came back clear, so after this, you’ll be good to go.” His voice softens.

“I know it can be scary your first time, but once you start getting a feel for it, I think you’ll come to love it.”

She looks at him coldly. She wants to spit. Or vomit. Or cry. Or all the above. She signs the form, grabs the gun box and cartridges and leaves.

—

The engine hums as the truck idles in the driveway. She squeezes the steering wheel. Her palms are damp. She looks at the house. The yellow paint peeling away from the siding. The blinds forever closed. The viburnum blooming tall with white snowballs. She takes the gun from the box, loads all three rounds – just to be safe – and turns off the ignition.

Frank is lying across the floor, a hill of gray against beige country wallpaper. She's been meaning to redecorate. She's been meaning to do a lot of things. He flaps an ear and lifts his head eager for food. She walks slowly to him, green Sour Patch Kids in one hand and the other pressing the gun to her side. He stretches his trunk toward her, touching her face with tender intimacy – the way a blind person sees. He feels his way down her arm to the sugar-coated gummies and gathers them into his mouth.

She looks into his dark eyes. He probably has sores on his left side. His leg muscles have probably atrophied. She should have done this a long time ago. She should have taken him to the zoo or to a circus or even just to an open field where he could move freely. She should have moved. She should have torn down this house plank by plank when it became too small for him.

It's not her fault. It was never her fault. She didn't mean to find Frank. She didn't mean to keep him longer than that day at school. But she loved having something to take care of. To have something to tell secrets too. Something to protect and to protect her.

Something no one else had.

Her face is sore. Her back aches with tension. Tears soak her skin. Snot drips into her mouth. She watches as water wells in Frank's eyes and falls, charring his cracked gray skin. She takes a deep breath and steps back, lifting the rifle butt into the crook of her shoulder. She raises the barrel level with Frank's brow.

He trumpets loudly and rears – lifting himself high on his back legs, breaking through the ceiling. She releases a repressed, guttural sound – matching his cry. They stay frozen here – screaming, frightened, expectant – for a brief moment as plaster and broken wood and fiberglass rain into the living room. Frank begins to fall forward, poised to charge. She turns and runs to the basement, flinging open the door and bounding down the stairs. She falls to her knees and leans back, still wailing and empties all three rounds into the bust above the couch.

home sweet home

Ashley closes the garage door. She can tell the television is on. She can hear the high frequency its tubes emit. It is a beacon—a signal of what is waiting at the end of the hall. Sometimes it's dinner, sometimes someone is up late, sometimes it's a conversation being had that needs to be disguised as news watching. She won't know until she reaches the end.

She walks down the hall and sees Danielle lying on her stomach on her twin bed. She's reading something, pumping her crossed ankles back and forth to Amy Grant singing "Baby, Baby." She goes to her room, setting down her bag.

Until two years ago, the two girls shared every bedroom in every house they ever lived in. Now Ashley lives in the guest room. It is decorated as a male retiree's paradise—deep green carpet, green wallpaper with miniature golf balls, green runner with tiny men gazing into the distance at an excellent shot. It was originally meant to reassure the occupants that even though this development it wasn't gated, it still offered a country club experience. The house was a model home for a tract development being built. Once the houses were finished and sold, this one went on the market. Her mother said that she prayed for a model home. "Nothing to fix that way."

Ashley takes off her tennis shoes. She can hear the TV now. Entertainment tonight talking about the new Star Wars movie. Her mom likes to have it on, "just while I'm cooking." She can hear her parents talking quietly. They're in the kitchen, the sound of plates being pulled from the cupboard blocking every other word. Ashley goes to the

corner of the hall where she can see the TV, but not be seen by someone sitting on the couch.

When they were younger, the girls would sneak out there to watch whatever grown up movie their parents had on. They saw a cow fly across the screen right before her dad caught their reflection in a picture frame that hung on the wall next to the TV and made them go back to bed.

She crouches down against the wall. Their voices are low. It doesn't sound like a fight. That usually happens behind a closed door after she and her sister go to bed.

Her father is stern as usual and her mom sounds worried.

"So you've seen them?" Cupboards opening and closing.

...which will premiere on the website tomorrow centers on a fight...

"Yes." A sigh. Ice cubes clink in a glass.

...Obi Wan Kenobi and Jango Fett...

"Oh James. Have you talked to John?" Drawers opening. Silverware clinking.

...you draw your guns and you pow pow pow...

"Yeah... He says we need to make sure there aren't more copies. Make sure no one else sees them. I think we need to confront..." Plates being set on the table.

...space chase through the astroid planets...

"Are they bad?" Running water.

...the thing fogs up I can't see anything...

"They're... very obvious. He's - *they're* - all naked." Aluminum foil tearing, crinkling.

...I'll just carry on like this...

“Tell the girls dinners ready.” A glass is set on the counter. Footsteps.

Ashley quickly moves back to her room and quietly closes the door. She’s pulling off her running clothes when there’s a knock.

“Ash. Dinner.”

“Okay be there in a sec.”

She listens for her father to step away from the door. She pulls a sweatshirt over her head and looks around the room.

The four-post pine bed that used to be her parents, with teeth marks from when she chewed on the crossbeam as a child.

The tiny golfers engrossed in their under-par stroke, leaning into swing as they gaze into the green unknown.

The framed picture painted by a family friend of a little blonde girl, who is supposed to be her, arranging teddy bears in a field.

She stares at herself in the mirrored closet doors. Will they move again? Another church crumbling because of the people who run it. People who are unfortunately human.

She turns to leave. She wants to take the comforter off the bed and crawl under it until she’s all sweaty and can’t breathe. She twists the doorknob and makes her way down the hall.

a sermon

INT. CHURCH - DAY

The PASTOR, a white 42-45 year old male, stands on a stage behind a large but minimally styled pulpit. Soft blue and white light illuminate the stage. He is mid-sermon.

PASTOR

I used to play football in high school. Anybody wanna guess what position I played?

(beat)

CONGREGANT (OS)

Quarterback!?

PASTOR

Ha! That's very kind of you but no. Maybe some of you could tell...

CON'T:

(pat belly)

but I was a guard.

The audience laughs.

PASTOR

So for those of you who don't
know - I see a lot of ladies
here today in the audience -

(avoid their breasts)

an offensive guard is the
player that's line up next to
the player that throws the ball
back to the quarterback. So it
was *my* job

(crouch slightly)

to make sure that once that
ball was spiked, I was a *wall*.

The Pastor pauses briefly, still crouched next to the
podium with his head down.

CON'T:

PASTOR

You have to be willing to get
a little aggressive, even a
little mean...

The Pastor jumps forward and snarls. The audience gasps.
The initial surprise devolves into laughter. The Pastor
smiles and steps back to the podium.

PASTOR

Because it was my job, every
time I was on that field, to
protect my quarterback. That's
it. That was my sole purpose in
being on the team. To come out
every game and line up against
these...

(act like gorilla)

big dudes with death in their
eyes. And just get. Beat. Up.

The Pastor is pacing the stage, using his whole body to

CON'T:

implore the congregation.

PASTOR

And you gotta keep showing up,
keep *getting back up*, no matter
how many times you get knocked
down...

(beat)

because you *have* to protect.
Your. Quarterback.

The Pastor takes a deep breath and looks out on the audience as if he just remembered something and whatever it is may make him cry.

PASTOR

And this is the idea I want to
talk about today as we get
started in our series on Peter
and what the scripture say
about defense, revenge and
forgiveness. So if you open

CON'T:

your bulletin for today,
you'll see there's a space on
the back of the announcements
with some fill in the blanks to
follow a long with and some
space to add your own notes.

There are quiet murmurs in the audience as they ask
neighbors for pens and shuffle papers, readying
themselves to take notes. As they quiet down, the Pastor
starts again.

PASTOR

The first thing I want us to
think about is *what* are you
defending?

(grab podium)

When you leave this place, and
go into your week, do people
know you are a guard of Christ?

The audience laughs as the Pastor pats his belly again.

CON'T:

PASTOR

In 1 Peter 3:15, he writes,
'But in your hearts honor
Christ the Lord as holy, always
being prepared to make a
defense to anyone who asks you
for a reason for the hope that
is in you.' Do people see the
hope of what you stand for,
like a wall of God's holy
knowledge? Go back to podium.
And then in verse 17, we see
'For it is better to suffer for
doing good, if that should be
God's will, than for doing
evil.' Like I said, if you are
a guard of the faith, you will
get knocked down. But if you
know your quarterback is worth
it,

CON'T:

(raise voice slightly)

if your *quarterback* is the *one and only, true saving God of the universe* than surely it must be worth it to suffer. To get *knocked down* time and time again. Surely he is worth it.

(deep breath)

Which brings us to the next question, which is probably the most important question we need to consider this morning and that is who is your quarterback?

(beat)

Is it Jesus back there? Or do you have someone else standing in His place? Is it your boss? Your wife? Your husband? Your

CON'T:

kids?

(beat)

Or is it a *something* else. A job? A house? A car? A country club membership?

(beat)

In 2 Peter 2:1 and 2, he says, 'But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed.'

(beat)

CON'T:

And finally, in 2 Peter 3:16 and 17 he says, 'There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.' And this is what I want to leave you, beloved followers of Christ, to take with you this week,

(beat)

Be careful of the lawless ones, be careful of the ones who want to take your focus. Are they

CON'T:

the ones worth defending? Are they bringing you closer to your goal? Or are they taking you further from your quarterback?

(beat)

Let us pray.

with tired legs

I expect to find you on the running trail
an unashamed girl in high heels and a diaper, smiling
behind sunglasses, unaware of her indecency
as she shuffles across grandmother's floor.
By the time I reach the bus stop, sweat drips
from my loose fists. You left the night we found
the photographs, the pastor slumped
between two bare-breasted women in the backyard.
The cicadas hum rhythm to my shoes skidding
across gray gravel. Calluses linger on my hands
from the last time I remember you, when I was still
rowing, holding the oar parallel before breaking
into the water, pulling us back yet forward, the sun
beating my exposed skin as I see the point
where I am to make my turn for home.

thicker than water

Britney turns down the music as they pull up to the gate of the country club. She tells the guard they're going to the Richardson's. Brent is already there; it's his grandparents house. So when the guard calls the house to check if the elderly couple are expecting three teenage girls in a baby blue VW Beetle convertible, he will be the one to answer the phone. The guard comes back with a bright pink paper decal that is stamped with the date and the groups time of arrival. They hang it on the rear-view mirror to indicate to anyone who would care to notice that they belong there. The arm of the gate lifts and the guard waves them through with a have a good night and they wave back with a you too.

Britney turns up the radio, forcing P!nk's There You Go to compete with the wind wiping the girls ears as she speeds past the pristine golf course. She takes a corner fast and the wheels squeal. Jess screams from the passenger seat. Ashley braces herself against the back before leaning forward.

"You think maybe you should slow down a bit?"

Jess rolls her eyes. "You think maybe you should calm down a bit Ash?"

"I'm just saying.... Someone might call the front and then security will come get us or something..." Ashley leans back, rethinking the decision to come tonight.

They stop the car in front of a large stone and stucco house tucked in the shadow of a rocky hill. Ground lights illuminate the short, full palm trees that block the front

windows. The front door is open.

Britney takes the keys out of the ignition and Jess pulls brown hair from her eyes as she pops her gum and checks herself in the rearview mirror. Ashley sits up on the back of the seat and swings her legs over the side of the car while slide-hopping to the driveway.

Britney looks back at her. “Dude!”

“What’d I do?” Ashley looks embarrassed.

“Careful with the car.”

“Sorry.”

Red Hot Chili Peppers spills out through the open door. Britney skips past the threshold and looks around. “Honey, I’m hooooooooooooommmme.”

Brent, who is almost handsome in an Abercrombie and Fitch sort of way, except hairier and shorter, walks into the foyer holding two martini glasses full of something clear and greets her in a cheesy transatlantic accent. “Darling you look absolutely marvelous.”

They begin to kiss aggressively as Jess and Ashley reach the door. Brent spills one of the martinis on Britney and laughs. “Damn. Guess we’ll need to get you a new shirt.”

The house looks like a fancy New York apartment from the 80’s. Lots of shiny black and gold and chrome. The TV in the sunken living room silently plays the movie, Thicker than Water to empty black leather couches. Angular neon purple and turquoise prints hang in the dining room over a polished black table. Brent and Britney move to the

dark hallway and disappear.

“You want a drink?” Jess makes her way to a bar near the kitchen.

“Um... no. No thanks. I don't drink.” Ashley walks over to the sliding glass window and looks out onto the illuminated pool.

“Right. Forgot. Pastor's kid can't have any fun.”

The bar is built into a separate alcove just off the kitchen. Four chrome barstools line the counter and there is a large wine cooler set into the wall. Jess starts opening the cupboards and pulling out bottles with different colored liquid in them.

Ashley turns to the TV to see dark haired men in black and white paddling themselves on long boards over swelling waves. She imagines being suspended like that, surface tension holding her atop the water, just floating.

“Yeah...”

“Look. I'm real good at making drinks. I can make you something fruity? It won't even taste like alcohol.”

Ashley wonders why she came here. She knows Britney and Jess; rather she knows *of* them. They'd been going to the same schools for 5 years, had a lot of the same classes and went to youth group and summer camp and all that, but she doesn't know *know* them. They're cheerleaders. They have boyfriends. Britney and Brent are probably having sex at that very moment. Why did they want to bring her to one of their kickbacks? Why did she agree? Even going so far as to say she would spend the night at Jess's.

She hates spending the night at other people's houses. Sleeping in a pile of couch

cushions on the floor is not cute anymore and it was never comfortable. Ashley hated the mornings after. She'd be the first wake up, confused by where she was and have to lie on the floor and wait for an adult to come out and make coffee or something. And it was always the dad that came out first, which made Ashley feel awkward in her boxers and oversized WWJD t-shirt and no bra, just lying there, waiting for approval to be awake.

She takes a deep breath. "Fine. I guess if it won't taste like alcohol..."

Brent and Britney come back into the living room, their hair wet and tousled. Britney has on a different shirt that reads "Lovescape Tour 1991-1992." Brent goes to the CD player and changes the Red Hot Chili Peppers to G. Love and the Special Sauce.

"Who else is coming?" Britney walks over to the bar and takes a bottle of brown liquid with a pirate on it and pours four shots.

"Nate and Tad should be here soon. They were going to get some beer." Brent is fiddling with the DVD player, trying to get it to loop the movie that's been playing. Jess pours something green into a glass, adds some yellow juice, tastes it, pours something clear in it, adds some red juice, and tastes it again.

"Ladies and gentleman! Boys and girls! It's time to get fuuuuucked uuuuup!" Britney twirls her hand as if she's just performed a magic trick.

"Alright, alright, alright." Brent mimics Matthew McConaughey as he steps on and over the couch and up onto the floor that leads to the kitchen. "So, PK coming out with the big kids... We gonna get to see the real Ashley Bosch tonight?" He does a subtle shimmy. Britney elbows him in the stomach.

"Here Ash." Jess hands her a tall glass filled nearly to the top with an orangish

liquid. “I made Ashley a special drink.”

“Well, excuse me, VIP. I didn’t know we were babysitting tonight.” Brent laughs and takes one of the shots.

Ashley looks at them staring at her. “You’re not.”

She grabs a shot off the counter and swallows it before her brain and her throat can protest. It burns and she coughs. She instinctively chugs the drink Jess handed her, trying to quell the flames crawling up her insides. Brent and Britney clap and cheer.

She gasps and inhales deeply, setting the glass on the counter and looking at the shiny faces smiling their approval as she settles into the warmth of her smoldering stomach.

my stomach

died on June 22nd, 2004 in Pismo Beach, CA at 10:42pm. It drowned in Southern Comfort after being chased by Natty Ice. No one noticed. The campfire light casting shadows against tents where the stomach gurgled, burped a salty bubble and slumped against taut nylon. It buried itself under cold sand and slept. Three hours later, the stomach resuscitated as a sea turtle, ravenous. It ate its grave and its shell. It sucked the moisture from the heavy night air. But no one noticed. The tiny turtle army-crawling clumsily over refined rock, hunting snipes, calling a friend from the desert with the new news, then eating the cell phone, because it was, after all, still a stomach. And no one noticed. The sea stomach flapping in fear down the shoreline, searching for more. Of anything. Trying to satiate itself on shattered shells, worn glass, dirty condensation at the bottom of plastic cups. Trying to forget how it felt to be a stomach. Because no one noticed. The ocean crashing with moon dust, laughing in and out and in and out as it lapped up the little yearning sea turtle, belly finally filled by the briny baptism.

hume lake

I am sitting in an open amphitheater in the Sequoia National Forest, staring into a large bonfire. It smells like dust, decaying leaves, algae and adolescent body odor. A camp counselor plays an acoustic guitar on an unlit stage. Sap from the burning wood pops. Another counselor stands. “Take a moment to reflect on this last week. What masks do you need to let go of? What collar are you wearing that only Jesus is the key to?”

Ephesians 2:8 “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

The camp always has a theme. Storylines and characters created to communicate a bible message in a way that will motivate middle schoolers to be *better*, be different than when they arrived. This year’s theme is *Something Something Adventures of Cephas Von Plinth*, which roughly translates to *Something Something Peter the Rock*, which roughly translates to *Something Something Rock the Rock*. Cephas is a fool who wears large, wooden collar with a bunch of Mardi Gras-like masks hanging from it.

Galatians 5:1 “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”

“When you know, write it down on that index card we gave you and then when you're ready, come up to the fire and drop it in.” I was a camper here in middle school. A twelve-hour bus ride, watching *Sandlot* on repeat, to spend a week eating too much candy and swimming in the lake and competing against other churches through games, “cabin cleanups” and bible verse recitation. I loved memorizing verses. It was a practice in perfection. One year, I made it to the final round of competition. I said something like “for” instead of “because” and lost. I went into the woods and cried for half an hour.

1 John 4:18 “Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love.”

All I wanted to be when I grew up was a counselor here. Now I am – in charge of taking care of ten middle school girls – to bestow greater Christian knowledge, to listen and care and maybe offer some advice, like my counselors did for me. And all I can think about is whether or not my mother will find the bag of cocaine I hid inside a birthday card for my grandmother. I thought about bringing it with me but I'm pretty sure there's a level of Hell reserved for people who do drugs at a kid's Christian camp.

Romans 6:12-14 “Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to sinful desires. Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give

yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life.”

I watch as some of the campers make their way forward, dropping paper into the fire. Some watch it burn, some warm their hands, others just turn and walk back to where they were sitting. There is a girl sobbing to my right. One of her friends has a hand on her knee, rocking in prayer. Others circle around in an awkward group hug. The guy with the guitar has started quietly singing, “How greeeaaaat is our God? Sing with me, how greeeaaaat is our God? And all will see how greeeaaaat, how greeeaaaat is our God.”

Philippians 4:13 “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

This is a “mountain high” – that euphoric sense of being so ashamed about what your life is back in the valley and yet so seen and loved and hopeful because this time it’s *different*. One of times I was here, they did an altar call in the middle of the week – a moment for “non-believers” to come forward, say “the prayer,” and be saved. I had already said the prayer three times by this point – once when I was four, asking my mom how to get Jesus to live in my heart, then again around nine because I was so afraid of going to Hell and just recently, just in case, just to make sure I was *really* saved. As I watched everyone in the auditorium go forward, I wondered if anything would actually change once I was back home. I stayed seated that time.

John 14:6 “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to

the Father except through me.’”

The non-signing counselor paces in front of the fire. “Once you have put your card in the fire, take another moment and pray, asking God to impress his hope and love and freedom upon your heart.” I hear more cries. Some of my campers are consoling each other in front of me. I fold the index card in half, slide it my pocket and watch firelight flicker against the dark forest.

John 8:32 “And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

the second missions trip

I'm sitting in the cement room where we just finished breakfast. It still smells like oatmeal. Traffic hums below. A breeze slides through the open windows of the sixth floor of a middle school in Jieyang, China. It's cool against the heavy humidity of the summer. It's been a long month. I haven't pooped in two weeks, I've had a headache for about three days straight and the collars of my shirts are marked with snot that won't stay in my nose. Somehow, I simultaneously feel content – like I finally have some kind of purpose while being the most physically uncomfortable I have ever been in my life. I desperately want this mission trip to be over. A teacher from the school walks in the room, moving like she lost something. What are you reading? She's pointing at my bible.

We are here under the guise of a cultural exchange program and we are only allowed to talk about Jesus if someone asks us first. The people who work with us can still “disappear” if it is found out that they are Christians. But we would just have our bibles taken away and asked never to come back, please and thank you. This is only the second time someone has asked. It's a bible. It has stories about Jesus, I say. Do you know who that is? She looks like I just asked her what two plus two is. Jesus is a Buddha, she says. Truth is, I don't know much about Buddhism and I'm not sure how to make it make sense, so I give her the only thing I can think of. Jesus is *the* Buddha. The words stick on

phlegm that drips down my throat. No, she says. There are many Buddhas. We can pray to Jesus too. Wait. She's not hearing me right. Jesus is the one and only God of the universe who came to earth and died so that the world wouldn't have to live in pain and suffering anymore. We blink at each other. Do you... do you understand what I mean? She looks at me like I am trying to sell her a snake. Yes, she says. I understand. She takes a step forward, sitting two tables away from me. She looks down the hall. You don't understand. You Americans think that all pain is American pain. But I have pain. China has pain. We have suffering. We know. You are not the only ones with divorce and fighting and death and hate. People hurt here, but no one cares because it is not American. She turns to leave. Enjoy your Jesus book. Her footsteps resonate off the cold concrete walls as I look back at the flimsy pages of my bible.

good news

I am in a line. Like everyone else, I am holding onto the backpack in front me. We are a group of kindergarteners, linked together on some kind of field trip. We are walking through what I imagine a college campus or a corporate complex looks like - tall white buildings with long windows reflecting flat gray sky. There is an old city with dark cathedrals in the distance. I understand this to be someplace foreign.

There are people are sitting on benches and on blankets in a quad. The grass is wet looking, like velvet. Everyone is happy – talking and throwing frisbees and riding bikes and laughing and falling into the velvet ground kissing. Like a commercial. Like it's not about to rain.

We reach the center of the quad and the leader of the line puts down a sack full of puppets. Some people walk to the bag and start picking through it. Others group together. I don't know what to do so I walk over to a group. A boy hands me a stack of small yellow booklets.

I ask what I'm supposed to do with the books but he walks away from me. So I try to ask the girl next to me, but she's talking to someone else. When I tap her on the shoulder, she turns but I still only see the back of her head. I look at the girl she is talking to but see ponytail hanging where a nose should be. I grab a boy next to her by his backpack and turn him to face me. There's just ashy blonde hair fading into a pimply

neck.

The puppet show begins, so I walk to a group of 20-somethings sitting on a blanket at the edge of the quad. I hand one of them a booklet. They smile and laugh. Their mouths grow wide and their lips stretch from ear to ear, revealing toothless gums. The boy I gave the booklet to puts it in his flat mouth and starts to mash it between his soft pink gums until it turns into a wet beige ball. He swallows it and opens his mouth to the group like he just preformed a magic trick. The rest of the group stares, mouths agape in wonder. They clap as he wipes the drool from his round chin with the back of his thin hand.

The sky is pink and yellow and soft blue like dawn. I walk to a man who looks like a secret service agent and hand him a booklet.

“Do you know the four spiritual laws?”

There is a pause, both of us staring at each other, not moving. He bends slightly and spits blood on the pavement. Some of it splatters on my right shoe. I want to ask him if he’s alright but I feel myself jerked back by my backpack and something is put over my head. There are hands on my arms and legs, carrying me like the Ark of the Covenant. Like a pig on a stick to be roasted.

Soon we are inside. I hear a door close. A chair is scrapped across the floor. I am put down. I hear faint pulsing music coming from another room. Someone takes the bag off my head. A white room illuminated from the ceiling and walls and floor. One wall is all window, facing the quad. The chair is positioned in the middle of the room looking out on the people who begin to gather in from of the glass. Someone pushes me forward

and I understand they want me to sit. I take off my backpack and sit down. Behind me I hear a man speak in a foreign language, thick like molasses.

“Nothing.”

A gun is shoved in my mouth. The barrel cuts the palate and I wonder if I can break it apart with my teeth and swallow it. I hear molasses again.

“Nahfen.”

Suddenly there is a loud ringing and it feels like someone is holding me from the skin on the back of my neck and I smell charred steak. I’m staring into light. My jaw is flat like a puppet. I bring my head forward and smile from ear to ear while the men look at me like I just did a magic trick.

landing

It has been a long hour of sitting, listening to announcements in Czech, a language I will never be able to understand because I am terrible with those types of things and it will be another six hours before reaching Heathrow, where I will get lost and bang my arm against the cement wall in the underground trying to find my connecting flight and a bruise will form to match the ones on my shaking legs as I reach the counter and am told that I've been moved to business class, where I will proceed to get drunk on dry champagne that doesn't help my swollen tongue navigate my flooding thoughts past my teeth that chatter because I am cold and forgot my sweatshirt but no matter because soon I will touch down in Chicago in the summer and find the blue duffel bag that is now my life, heavy as me, circling baggage and the man who will lead me through white stairwells and down green elevators to the train where he will tell me ain't nothing in this life free miss and I'll think brother don't I know it and shove a twenty dollar bill into his dry rough palm, though at the ticket counter, I'll claim I don't have any money but they will let me go anyway because they will see my now translucent skin and the sagging jeans I've been wearing for three days and the bruise growing like a flower tattoo but not really because a bruise is just blood spilling under the surface while I sit in the 'L' trying to not pass out but then I'll wake up on the California platform and a woman will hand me a green tea and a man will tell me he's going to get me a taxi where do I need to go

and I will think of the irony and tell him Moody because maybe they'll let me sleep there since I know some people there but then I'll change my mind and tell him Union Station because I need to catch a bus to Kansas City, where I won't be able to explain why I'm two weeks early because I'm terrible with those types of things but the bus driver won't let me on without a ticket for the right day, even though it'll be midnight and my arms will be numb by the weight of my blue duffel bag, and he will tell me ain't nothing in this life free miss and I'll think brother don't I know it as I shove past him, shove past the other hunched travelers, shove back into the taxi where I'll tell the man who hasn't asked for anything to take me to Moody because I stayed with someone there once and she told me that my trauma cannot be weighed against anyone else's, even as the weight of my bag lays me out prostrate, crawling up the steps of the school like a pilgrim paying penance for a bruise that will spread down my arms, turning me purple while pounding on a glass door that a young man will open against the other RA's protest, allowing me to pull the blue bag from my broken back, while he asks where I'm coming from, but I will be running to the bathroom because the bruise will have moved up my neck and demand to bloom against the white tile walls and the sinks and finally, sliding into a blue stall, I will be able to pull up the roots, and walk back with stained shoes, empty and ashamed but also light for the first time as I explain that I need a mop but the RAs will insist on cleaning up the bathroom, and to just lay down on the scratchy tweed couch over which a large picture of Jesus hangs and I will look up and say ain't nothing in this life free man and with outstretched holey hands, he'll respond child don't I know it.

bathroom redemption

I am lying on a mattress. Or perhaps it's a cot. Or perhaps it is just a sleeping bag on the off-white carpet of a loft floor in the house of a nice older couple in Ohio. I'm reading Psalm 119, the long one, comparing the English Standard Version against the Message because they told me not to fall asleep. Not that I could. They're taking shifts to check on me. Plus my abdomen is sore from clenching and the acrid smell of wet pills fills my nose.

Psalm 119:123 (MSG) "I can't keep my eyes open any longer, waiting for you to keep your promise to set everything right."

What I've explained – but what no one seems to want to hear – is that I wasn't trying to kill myself. When I went to the bathroom that smelled like fake spring air and wet bath toys and saw the bottle of Tylenol, I was thinking about the girl from the missions trip who told me that her mom died and she doesn't believe in God anymore and the boy from my hometown whose parents are going through a nasty divorce because his father has a double life and the girl in this discipleship program whose mother was just diagnosed with breast cancer. Not to mention it was negative eight degrees outside.

Psalm 119:25 (MSG) "I'm feeling terrible – I couldn't feel worse! Get me on my feet again. You promised, remember?"

The label said *RAPID RELEASE*, and I figured, sounds good. I kinda thought something bad was gonna happen after I took the third handful, but then I thought, maybe not. I had taken handfuls of Ibuprofen before and was mostly fine. So I was surprised when, at the bowling alley about thirty minutes later, everything started to tilt sideways and I found myself clawing up the wall to a bathroom that smelled like old mop and pink soap. I couldn't even hold myself up to get my head in the toilet.

Psalm 119:84 (MSG) "How long do I have to put up with all this?"

One of the leaders followed me and got me standing and out of the bathroom and into the van we had been using to visit Midwestern churches, trying to drum up enthusiasm for that summer's missions trips. Bowling night was over. The other students paced on the sidewalk under the neon pink sign, while the leaders asked me questions.

Psalm 119:154 (MSG) "Take my side and get me out of this; give me back my life just as you promised."

We drove in silence. Well, I was silent. The leaders were debating whether or not to take me to the hospital. The other students had gone to our host home in different cars. It was

decided that since I had already started throwing up, I didn't need to have my stomach pumped, but that I would stay with the women that night so they could watch my in case things went more South.

Psalm 119:77-78a (MSG) "Oh love me – and right now! – hold me tight! Just the way you promised. Now comfort me so I can live; really live;"

When we got to the older couple's house, I was clear enough to walk on my own. Though I couldn't see because I was crying. Because I was ashamed. And because by then, I did want to die. But it was too late.

Psalm 119:152 (MSG) "I've known all along from the evidence of your words that you meant them to last forever."

I threw up every twenty minutes for two hours in a bathroom that smelled of Scrubbing Bubbles and stale potpourri. And then I dry heaved for three more hours. I laid with my cheek on the cool toilet seat, sinuses filled with snot, throat sore from bile, staring at disjointed farm scenes sketched on a beige valance with lace curtains that fluttered in the heat pumping out of the floor vent. I dragged myself back to the bed or the cot or the sleeping bag on that off-white carpet of a loft floor in that nice couple's house and watched the sun rise over a frozen Ohio.

father-son/mind-heart

My shoulders are heavy with this knapsack, its tethers wind tight around my neck like scarves but not as soft like the hands I cannot hold because of disjointed fingers sagging within pocket-skin, slacking from days of labor forming calluses on my palms like my knees from nights of digging into hardwood floors like quicksand sinking up to my elbows jutting out like a bird's wing, featherless and bound to the earth like rooting toes into ancient dirt, cold and wet with hurricane rain like water sweeping through my eyes to look up clouded and bruised like my thigh from that one night I can't remember how your eyes seemed always to find me postured like the man of Notre Dame haunted by the echoes of bells he'll always be ringing for a ghost like you, still warm, intangible, ever-present upon my shoulders.

relationship between inanimate objects

My head is hot, its warmth overtaking the cool plaster of the toilet seat. I try to focus on the brown vomit clumped at the bottom of the sea foam green bowl. First thought: Who still has a sea foam green toilet? Second thought: I wish I had a sea foam green toilet.

The door clicks open and a finger pokes my back. I know it's yours. "How ya doing?" I try to laugh but cough instead. Flushing, I lean back off my knees and up against the yellowing cupboards housing useful bathroom items – toilet paper and bowl cleaner, toothpaste and brushes, hair dryer and straightener and other random items – a lighter, three pennies, some sprung out bobby pins, half of an old ticket stub. I wonder if they know they're forgotten.

I prop my arms on my bony knees and stare at my shoes. "Oh you know... Never better..." You're standing across from me in black tights and black boots on a black floor mat full of hairs and bits of tissue paper. I want to pick up all of those little pieces and make it clean for you but I rub my shins instead. Your left foot is pointing toward the bathtub. You shift your weight. "So. I was wondering if you could do me a favor?"

The metal handle of the cupboard digs under my shoulder blade. "I'll do my best." The

room is tilting under me, so I put my hands on the floor to stabilize it. “Well you know, my roommate’s never done coke before, and we were just wondering like... if we could buy what you got and then get you some more. Or something. Later. I mean... you don’t have to, I just... thought I’d ask.”

I slump to my elbow and dig my left hand into my pocket. “Yeahhere.” There is an ache forming in my right shoulder. I look down, examining the dirt caked into the divots of the linoleum. “Thanks.” Your voice carries the weight of three pennies. I think of pictures of cities after a bomb has been dropped – the crater of something that was but now isn’t. I breathe loud but shallow. “Sorry...” There’s a bobby pin stuck under the black floor mat. “It’s cool. I’ve been there. Ready to go back out?”

You extend your hand. I wait. I’m looking at your knees sideways. I take your hand and wait. I pretend I’m still too dizzy to get up and wait. Another breath and I bring my legs in, push my back against the cupboards while you pull my arm and now I am facing you. You turn and I look back and for the first time, I notice that the bathroom is same color as the toilet. The paint has chipped away just above the tank, revealing a plaster cavity stained yellow with years of piss and shit and skin and hair spray. You start to pull me through the doorway, but I twist my fingers out of your hand and turn off the light.

friends don't let friends

I am on a cruise. We're near Alaska. Maybe it's Greenland. It doesn't matter – it's someplace cold. But I'm not cold. I'm wearing a swimsuit, standing on a polished wooden deck. The icebergs look like ice cubes and the ocean looks like gelatin. The sky is clear and cloudless and the horizon line blends into it so it looks like we're inside a blue balloon. We're just... floating. My friends are there. Or rather, I understand that they represent my friends. They're shadows drinking in a hot tub on the other end of the deck. The steam coming off the water and their faces are obscured. They call to me and I go over to them and they laugh. Like the way people do when they've been talking about you. I walk to the edge of the ship and look down at the ocean. They call to me again and I go back and they tell me to get in the hot tub. I say I don't want to. I want to jump into the ocean. A muddled face says I should. So I go back to the edge of the ship and jump in.

The water is the coldest water I've ever felt in my life and my body begins to tense and I can't see the bottom and the sky makes it impossible to tell where the surface is and it's as if sand has filled up all my organs and I'm just... sinking.

When I break through the water, I am gasping as I climb a ladder to the deck. I fling myself onto the smooth wood and try to slow my breathing. The people in the hot tub call to me again and I go to them again, but no one is there. The hot tub is empty and

dark. I go back to the edge and look down at the ocean again. It looks thick and warm. I hear their laughter and look back to the hot tub and they're there with vacant faces wildly grinning back at me. I put a foot on the railing and bring my other leg over so I'm straddling the metal barrier. I look back at the group and someone yells jump! And I let go and fall into the ocean.

The water is even colder than before somehow and my arms and legs are beginning to stiffen and freeze and the sand in my stomach is pulling me down faster than before and I'm screaming in tiny bubbles that can't reach the surface.

I break through the water again and climb the ladder and crawl, shivering, onto the shining dark wood deck. I close my eyes and breathe hard through my nose. They call to me again. When I look up, they are standing over me yelling at me to jump.

untitled

all that cannot be said
can be heard in the distance
between us, standing
next to you – a hamster
with unsounded seeds
tucked against my cheek
they bulge
longing for somewhere safe
but I can't
so I swallow them (two at a time)
where they grind inside of me, constantly
polished, reshaped, always remaining
unabsorbed, never breaking, weighing heavy
in my stomach, waiting to make their way
out.

death is not contagious

That's what DT tells me when I come back to the house and find 33 of the goldfish dead. "Dude. Fish die. It just happens." "Yeah, but like, I haven't even had them for an hour. Now I gotta buy more." I shouldn't have used the green ice tea jug to hold all of them. I should have measured the water and conditioned it properly.

I think of sitting in my car that night I fell in love with you, black boots up on the dash, your head on your knees, struggling to keep back the tears that needed to spill for a friend who maybe you didn't know all that well, but well enough. "I was supposed to call her last night. And like maybe if I had remembered, she wouldn't have done it. Ya know?" I turn the jug back and forth and watch the dead goldfish turn together at the bottom of the green glass. The movement gives them the appearance of life. But then the water settles.

I go outside to smoke a cigarette. Miami tells me death follows this house, what with the boy from some northern state who fell off the balcony and broke his neck and the girl whose mother is dying in a bed in a city where it freezes in the winter. We're soaking in the warm summer night when we notice kids running out of alleys and yards, sprinting south, spilling onto the street like caught fish falling out of a net. We laugh as they swim, a school undulating left and right in the current of themselves. And then the cops show

up. Two next to the house, two across the street and two on the crossroad. An ambulance squeals past and stops three houses from us. We go downstairs.

A woman is walking toward us barefoot. “Know what happened?” “Naw we just saw people running.” A girl from school is across the street and I jog over to her. She’s on her phone, frantically asking someone, “Where am I supposed to go?” Breathlessly, she explains what happened. “Apparently someone got shot.” “What the fuck!? Seriously?” “Yeah like five times or something.” We walk toward the ambulance where a group of people have gathered. There is a girl wailing on a grass hill on someone’s front lawn. I think of how I’ve seen Jewish people mourn in documentaries, rocking back and forth, tearing their clothes, throwing dust over their heads. This sacred public display of grief. A stretcher is carried down the steps and rolled in front of a boy who is screaming, “Oh my God! Oh my God! It’s not him! It’s him! No God!” The stretcher moves past me. I look at the face of the boy lying on it and turn to DT. “I know it’s bad, but I wish I had I camera right now.” “Yeah me too.”

As a child, I believed I would die alone. Someone finding me days later, needing to borrow pliers or being pissed about the mail piling up, all junk advertisements and credit card offers. That night in my car, I wanted to tell you sometimes people don’t know how to express what they need, but the words felt like a bunch of grapes in my mouth, so I crushed them. The ambulance lights flash, casting an eerie red white glow on the faces still standing in the street. We walk back to the house slowly, saying things that don’t say

anything. “Dude, that’s just... crazy.” “I can’t believe that even happened. Like what?”

“Did you see the kid on the stretcher? He was so close I could’ve touched him.”

I think of the goldfish still stacked on top of each other at the bottom of that green iced tea jug. When we get back, I carefully transfer the living ones into clean water, seal the dead ones in a plastic bag and throw them in the trash.

push and pull

DT says she's cold as we park the car in the back lot by the dumpsters. It's the end of summer and we've only just begun to drink the night. I give her the magenta tights I'm wearing under my favorite black jeans, the ones with the giant rip under the butt and she quickly changes, putting them on under her favorite blue pleather shorts. A few pulls of vodka before we escape the car. With an expired ID she got from a girl in printmaking who could pass for her sister, we plan to go to bars she's never been to but the street is blocked by a double decker truck pumping remixed radio pop songs down the boulevard. People are kicking the pavement and waving their hands over their heads, drawing each other into their hips, exploring each other's backsides. We are entranced by this beautiful display of freedom, the uninhibited joy of community. We push in, dancing around each other in ritual fashion, jumping, shouting the rhythmic words we've learned subliminally until we are out of breath and can only whisper into each other's ears "shots" then fly, arms spread, catching the waning summer air in our t-shirt sleeves while shooshooshooing ourselves back to the car, giving us the strength to pull open the door, pull the vodka across our teeth, pull ourselves back to the ground, pull our pants down behind the dumpsters to pee, pull ourselves back into the crowd. We find the tall boy who dances well and I lick his chest and serenade him with my impeccable lip-syncing. He asks me to marry him and I say yes and he says get the rings and I say which ones and he says it

doesn't matter as long as they're not watermelon or strawberry. Again we fly back to the car. We stay longer now and she tells me of a time when she hid under the desk in her parent's house and cried and cried and cried like she had never cried before and when her mom found her, she just looked distractedly around the room and announced that dinner was ready. She drinks again and runs from the car but the crowd is leaving and music is fading and all that is left to do is thank the truck and plead please please come back and shut the street down again.

the punchline

So I'm walking home from this bar. (I mean, how do you start a story like this? You just have to start it, right?) So I'm walking home from this bar, some dirty fucking place called "chaos" or "revolution" or some stupid name like that. And honestly, I'm sick of the fucking scene anyway, full of stupid guys who stare you down, talking some bullshit then getting pissed off when you ditch them after they buy you a drink. Like you owe them something or some shit but it's like bro, I'm not just gonna let you stick your dick in me cause you bought me a fucking vodka and soda, so back the fuck off.

Anyway, I'm walking home and I'm almost to where I turn down my street when some dude starts yelling hey! hey! so I turn around (people tell me I'm too nice but I mean, I've always thought it's better to get attacked from the front then from behind, right?) and this guy's like hey can I get a cigarette, which I'm pretty used to cause I get asked for cigarettes more than I get asked for money, which I think is weird but whatever, I give him one and now we're standing at the light waiting to cross and he's like where do live and I tell him over a street and I ask where he lives and he says over two, can I walk with you? And I'm thinking like, fuck now this is awkward cause I can't say no cause we're walking in the same direction so I'm like whatever and the light changes and we start

walking.

So we're walking and he's like do you do drugs and I'm like naw man (I mean, I lied, but I wasn't drunk enough to do them with some stranger, right?) and then he gives me a little baggie and a piece of paper with a phone number and his name on it, something fucking stupid like Nathaniel or Vespar or Khronic and he tells me to tell my friends about this quality shit and I'm like okay cause who the fuck cares anymore and by this point we were almost to my house and he asks again where do you live and I tell him down the street more (I mean, I lied but I wasn't dumb enough to tell him the truth, right?)

Anyway, we're walking past my house when he shoves me up against this tree and I'm suddenly not so drunk and I'm suddenly very aware of the bark digging into the back of my head and his hand pressing into my mouth, which tastes dirty and like some fucking sour shit I can't place. And he's not going for my pants, I think maybe he's going for his, and I'm pushing against his chest but I guess I am still drunk enough cause I can't seem to get the placement of my hands to his body quite right. And he's hitting me on the side of the head, I think maybe he's going for my temple, but he's using the flat part of the inside of his fist, which I think is the wrong way to go about it. Why doesn't he just hit me straight on (I mean, it's a weird thing to think, but I think it, alright?) and the bark has its rough hands up the back of my shirt, scratching me like I'm the one with the fucking itch. And then his fist meets my ribs and this lady who walks her little dogs at all hours of

the night is yelling you quit hittin that girl or imma call the police! that's it, imma call the police! while her dumb little dogs are yapping like there's some kind of fucking fire. All of it's enough for me to finally get my knee against his leg and kick him away from me, though all he does is skip backward, looking like a shitty amateur boxer, like he might come back with a jab before running away while clutching his pants because he didn't win his belt.

So I'm sitting in the grass in front of this woman's apartment, two fucking houses down, waiting while gripping the under sides of my legs as the lights start to blur and she tells me just sit, imma wait with you, just stay, like I'm one of her fucking little dogs, small boned and fragile, crying like someone's fucking dying or some shit like that, whimpering thank you thank you thank you thank you over and over cause I mean... what else am I supposed to do in that situation, right?

mid-day couch nap

For some reason, I thought it was a good idea to push my car. I guess I didn't want to go back for it, and as it was such a beautiful day outside and knowing that it would be dark by the time I was done, I decided pushing it was the best option. So I wrapped my arms around the tail end and moved it forward. Easy as pie. And it was working out great. I was getting the best of both worlds. The sun was warm, the birds were singing, I could see the kids playing at that one park near the house I grew up in back in the desert, the salty air of the Pacific Ocean brushing against my face. You couldn't ask for a more perfect California day. And at the end of it, I was still going to have my car.

The trouble began when I got to the hill that leads to the plaza. Though it wasn't really the plaza, it was more like places up north, in Oregon; small touristy towns that are attractive because of their quaintness. The kind of communities you'd hear about on radio shows like *Prairie Home Companion*. I love those places. The problem was that I started losing control of my car because of the hill. For a while I controlled it all right, running back and forth, pushing it side to side. I was keeping it pretty steady.

Things got really bad about halfway down the hill. The car was picking up momentum and soon, it slipped out of my hands and was careening toward a small empty gazebo in a

park by the water. Typically, not that big of a deal, but since things rolling freely do not have a tendency to stay straight, my car started to swerve ever so slightly to the right. Also, typically, not that big of a deal, except now my car was headed for a store front, where a young mother and her toddler were standing, enjoying the window display. I ran as quickly as I could, trying to grab onto the tail bumper of my car, but every time, it was just out of my grasp. The only thing I could think to do was to push the mother and child out of the way and stop the car with my body. So I ran and I ran and I ran, past the car, right into the woman and her baby, sending them flying through the air, right as the car hit a fire hydrant, causing water to spray everywhere, right as I felt a crushing pain in my midsection and everything went black. People were mumbling above me, saying things like, it's okay, you're going to be okay, just lay still, don't try to move, that was an incredible thing you did, just don't move. And then I felt weightless, my brain taking a second to connect that I had just been picked up. And now I was being put down, back in my apartment.

It's quiet except for the voices. They keep telling me to be still, don't move, you need to rest, you just need to rest, but they're fading away from me, they're leaving me here and I'm yelling after them but I don't have a voice. I have questions, I want to say. Why can't I see, I want to say. What happened, I want to say. What about the mother and her baby. But all that comes out are dry, pathetic yelps. I try to get up, try to chase after them, but I'm paralyzed and I just fall to the floor, whisper-screaming for anyone.

When I wake up, I'm on my couch, just as when I fell asleep, but it feels like a different day. I check the room to see if any significant difference. My eyes are still blurry. I notice a man wearing a striped shirt, smeared paint on his face, like an off-duty mime, coming toward me. He raises a finger to his lips, leans over me and drops liquid in my eyes.

i just want to go home

I remember running. I remember the light drizzle of rain and my clothes under my arm and the cold morning breeze blowing through my hospital gown. I remember the way the branches scratched my back as I frantically pulled on my pants, my thin t-shirt, my fraying shoes in the bushes near the highway. I remember the remnant of an IV, blood under the tape, still clinging to my arm. I don't remember yanking it out.

When the cops find me, I am walking down a suburban street with my thumb out. I guess I think it'll help. After they bring me back, the doctors take a scan of my brain. There are abnormalities, they say. Calcium deposits. Yes, I know. Had 'em since birth. Then I'm lying in bed watching the front desk while listening to the nurse tell me about her son, the man who left during nursing school, the night shifts. You said you go to school, she asks. Did I? Yes. Where do you go? Art school. That sounds like fun, she says. I guess. I bet it's pretty difficult, pretty competitive? She's good at being a mom.

I'm nicer this time. A few years ago, on my sister's twenty-first birthday, my friends had to drag me kicking and screaming to the car. Apparently I smashed someone's guitar.

But it wasn't until I fell out of the passenger's seat at the gas station and hit my head on the cement and began throwing up that they thought maybe I should go to the hospital. A father's face is a stern thing when he's looking down on you under sterile light. But that won't happen this time. They're 1,500 miles away sleeping ignorantly. Do you have someone coming to pick you up, the mom asks. Yes. Yes of course. But I don't know who to call.

When Cherub Face sees me, she just shakes her head like I'm a child who's just been caught eating dirt. DT turns away, hiding her face in her palm like a parent unable to watch her child be taken off of life support. I kick and yell at her like why don't you fucking do something already. Cherub Face says we'll talk about this in the car. The doctor comes in and hands her my papers. Someone found her passed out in their front yard this morning, she says. BAC was at a .37. You'll probably need to explain the follow-up procedures later.

I cry in the car. I can't help it. I never can when I'm like this. The radio is off. My head vibrates against the window, absorbing the moist whirl of the wheels on the highway as they take me home. You got a scan of your brain, Cherub Face asks. Yeah. I have abnormalities.

after care instructions

Instructions for: ALCOHOL ABUSE

1. You have been diagnosed with alcohol abuse.
2. This is a serious, life-threatening problem that can ruin your life and the lives of everyone you love.
3. Alcoholism is an addiction. There is research that suggests alcoholism is genetic, which means maybe don't have kids.
4. Your blood alcohol level is TOO HIGH to drive yourself home right now. Despite what you tell yourself, you are not a good drunk driver.
5. Remember it is ILLEGAL to drive under the influence of alcohol. You may INJURE OR KILL yourself or others. Just because you haven't yet doesn't mean you won't.

Instructions for: ALCOHOLISM

1. You have been seen for alcoholism.
2. This means you use TOO MUCH alcohol and think you're the shiniest piece of shit that walks this earth.
3. Alcoholism is an addiction to alcohol. It can cause serious health problems, which you will ignore. It can also cause serious social and personal problems, which you are

currently pretending do not exist.

4. Some signs you might have a problem with alcohol are:

- You feel you should cut down on drinking.

MEDICAL RECORDS COPY

- You feel ashamed and guilty about your drinking, even if you only drink a little.
- You have taken or currently take the “hair of the dog.”
- You have periods of time where you don’t know how you got somewhere or who you are with or what you have done.
- You have ever woken up on a stranger’s porch, a random suburban lawn, a pool deck covered in your own shit, or a beach lifeguard station.
- You have stolen or have tried to steal alcohol by running out of an art gallery with a bottle you grabbed from the fridge while the artist’s mother chases you down the stairs.
- You have problems with multiple court systems across two states and cannot for the life of you figure out how to your license unsuspended.
- You do not know how to stop drinking but also don’t know how to continue living while drinking.

5. Drinking alcohol can other side-effects and problems. Some are:

- Pancreatitis
- Bleeding from the stomach and small intestine
- Esophageal tears
- Hematemesis

- Seizures, typically during withdrawals
- Liver failure
- Job failure

MEDICAL RECORDS COPY

- Relationship failure
- Delirium tremens (not the beer)
- Wet brain
- Hallucinations
- Delusions of grandeur
- Loss of friends, cellphones, shoes, self, etc.

6. IT IS VERY IMPORTANT that you think about cutting down or quitting drinking.

The medical staff can provide you a list of resources and phone numbers to call, which you can promptly lose in a stack of random papers that have accumulated on your desk at home.

MEDICAL RECORDS COPY

psychic party

So I'm at this psychic party. Someone's shotgun apartment on the Westside, all Christmas lights and candles and Nag Champa. There's tarot cards in the living room, palm reading on the front porch, aura face painting in the doorway between the living room and the hallway, a beer keg in the kitchen. A\$AP Rocky's "Fuckin' Problems" pumps quietly through a Bluetooth speaker. So witchy, so witchy, DT says. She runs around me like she's flying on a broom. Let's get weird, DT says.

The boy from Iowa – no, Idaho – that she thinks is "so cool so cool" goes down the hall to grab beers. I'm standing like a dumbass against the wall with my hands in my pockets because I don't know what else to do with them. They're usually holding a bottle of some sort, but I'm trying not to drink tonight. There's a bowl of buttons on a side table bathed in blue light, making it look like we're underwater. I grab a few of the fasteners and spread them out in my hand like seashells, turning them over and rubbing my fingers across the tops of them.

Yo, look at me. DT pats me on the back. I drop the buttons back in the bowl, palming one

with a peony carved in relief. You're right you're right, I see a fighter too. Some red head with neon glitter eye shadow and an opal septum piercing mimics DT's double talk while looking me up and down. DT's face is painted. Blue stripes mark her cheeks and yellow dots arch over her eyebrows. Giver, she says. We sit on the floor and Neon Glitter rubs red under my eyes and over my nose and down the middle of my neck. She accents my cheeks and collar bones with white dots. My mother would be so disappointed. I stand. Looks good, looks good. DT nods her head smiling as she appraises the work.

I go into the kitchen and pour a shot of vodka into a red cup, drink it, pour another, drink it, fill the cup with whatever is in the keg and go outside to smoke. The back stairwell is packed with half-farmer, half-Jaques-Cousteau looking kids so I make my way to the front porch. Neon Glitter is out there too. This is probably her place. You want me to read your palm? And I'm like, why the fuck not? Pretty sure my parents already think I'm going to Hell. Plus I rode with DT and Idaho, so I'm stuck here till they want to leave.

She sits me down like, give me your dominant hand. So I extend my right, thinking she should be smacking gum like some bored teenager working at a mall kiosk. She traces what she calls my "life line" with her index finger, mmhmm-ing to herself like a detective linking clues. Your life line and your head line start as one... See? Here. But then they split here. See? So something must have happened to change the way think from how you were raised. But then you have another one, down here, where it splits again. She's looking at me like she just shared the cure for cancer. So interesting, so

interesting.

When we get back to DT's place, she wants to have a séance. She puts on her rollerblades, grabs a broom and sweeps while skating around the room Cherub Face is moving into. Idaho gathers candles and some sage and arranges them in a circle in the center of the room. The three of us sit down. So what are we supposed to do? DT grabs our hands and closes her eyes. Complete the circle complete the channel, she says. Idaho and I take each other's hands and he closes his eyes and I look at them like they're giving me bad news. DT sways and mmmmm's and her hands move down his leg and his hand moves up my shirt and she's pulling us to the floor and I'm trying to lean us away from the candles and he's got her pants unzipped and she's got her hand on him and I can feel him getting hard as I'm stuck between their stomachs with my mouth on her and her rollerblade in my rib and they keep shifting to get themselves more on top of each other so I just kinda wiggle my way out from under them, button my shirt and leave. I put my hands in my pockets as I walk down the stairs, feeling the carved petals of the peony button rub against my palm.

flying

We're running late. Cherub Face couldn't find her earring. Leafy vines drape from balconies. A fountain pushes water into the air. It smells like dirt. Leather Jacket is waiting for us by the elevators in the hotel lobby. We're meeting his drug-dealer friend here. He won't let you in unless you're with me, he says. The room itself looks like it fell out of a Tarantino film before it gets all bloody. There're a couple Vincent Vega dudes watching *Pawn Stars* on a couch while two boxer-girlfriend types pour drinks in the kitchenette. Cherub Face wants to leave. Leather Jacket's drug dealer friend comes out of the bedroom and gives him a bro hug. He looks at us, nodding to the back. You want something? he says. Yeah, I say and we walk back into the bedroom. Some chick is passed out on the bed. Drug Dealer pulls a worn paper bag from the drawer that houses the Gideon Bible and unrolls it. What chu want, he says. Coke, I say. He takes a tiny bag of white powder and pours it on the bedside table, chopping it into a long, rough line. Don't you wanna split it up, I say. Do what you want. Just leave some for me, he says. I bend down and sniff hard and I am on fire as I run out the door while he calls after me like damn dude and I wave sorry at him staring into Cherub face's face, begging her to

leave cause there ain't no rest for the wicked and ItooktoomuchIgottarun, so she grabs my keys and we're off, flying to another something because there's always another something and we get to the park with all these pseudo hippie art bitches dancing and hooping, flame-breathing in the warm night and I ask some dragon if I can hula and she gives me her neon ring and Isweartogod, I am the best goddamn hooper that ever existed but I'm bored, so I throw it back at her and I run to the edge of the park, climbing the rock wall to the very tip-top, which is actually just different level ground, but still, everyone is yelling at me come down, come back down but I'm too high - I am *too high* – and I wonder how I got here as I half jump, half crawl, half fall to the to the grass and run as fast as I can back to the other side of the park where DT and Cherub Face watch the fairies spit fire and I shoo-shoo them until we're back in my car and driving to another something where people spill into the street, touching each other like it's the Fourth of July and I'm like, man I want to hear the Star-Spangled Banner – I want to hear fucking fireworks – and DT yells at these two dudes on the street to quickgetinthecar cause she's good at getting people to *GO*, and they squeeze in my back seat with me with Cherub Face whining to go home, go to bed but since there ain't no rest for the wicked, we go back to the first something with the indoor jungle but they won't let us in this time cause Drug Dealer doesn't know our two new friends even though they look like Samuel L. Jackson and I try to explain that they'd get along well with the Vince Vegas inside, but the door slams and we figure it's best not to cause a scene so we head back to DT's with Cherub Face on the verge of tears because this was *not* what was supposed to happen tonight but here I am, sinking into a couch that eats earrings finishing the last of my hard

cidars with the Samuels sitting like bouncers, like giants, like do they know where I can get some more coke and then we're off again to another something, across state lines with the morning coming up over the city, gold light bathing brown acres and broken-down houses and the Samuels keep telling me to just turn here, just turn here, we're almost there but when we get there, no one's home and they tell me to drop them off at the bus station with the birds all crying in the early Saturday sun as I shove my number and sixty bucks into one of Samuel's hands, telling him to call me if he finds anything cause I'm still looking for another something to keep me up, keep me from wrestling with my wicked.

life on a rollercoaster

Lifting and dipping, spinning and thrashing, intimidating and enticing, invigorating then ending yet always repeating. Metal safety bar tight against my abdomen, digging under my ribs, my lungs, pushing the breath out of me as I am tossed forward to left to right to left to right to left to right to slam back. Pinned to an uncomfortable hard plastic seat with feet dangling, going numb, while the janky car rattles round and round on a looped one-way track, speeding toward nothing quite defined, screaming “we’re all gonna die!” “just put yer hands up an enjoy the ride!” Then lurching to a stop. And I stumble onto the platform, coughing and spitting on my hand and knees, trying to slow my heart while everyone runs to get back in line.

Watch as I stand on shaky legs, brush myself off with still clammy hands and walk away.

police report

On 02-10-2013 at 0352 hours, #344 responded to traffic stop by #350.

Upon arrival, #344 contacted #350 who stated that the Arrest ran a red light, heading eastbound. The Arrest then turned left, traveling northbound in the southbound lane. After a brief stop, the Arrest turned onto the highway. #350 initiated the traffic stop and when questioned, the Arrest stated she was "headed home." "Where is home?" "West." "West of where?" "Here." The odor of alcohol emanated from the interior of the vehicle and when checked, the Arrest's license came back suspended. When #344 contacted the Arrest at the back of her (not) girlfriend's Jeep Cherokee, she swayed side-to-side and her eyes were clearly bloodshot. #344 was only able to conduct the Horizontal Gaze Nystagmus Test because of poor weather conditions. Before the Arrest was transported to EPD for further investigation of driving under the influence, she fell to the ground, kicking her arms and legs like she was gather something to her chest. The Arrest whimpered, "Shhhh immaturtle youcantseeme shhh."

At the station, #344 conducted the Walk-And-Turn and One-Leg tests. The Arrest repeatedly began the Walk-And-Turn test before being instructed to, proclaiming "Time

and tide wait for no man,” while trying to touch her nose with alternating index fingers, succeeding only in slapping her own face. The Arrest was unable to maintain the heel-to-toe stance and had to stop constantly to steady herself. Six steps into the test, the Arrest plopped to the floor like a child, explaining “Whatzapoint? I alray fail.” #344 informed the Arrest of the Implied Consent Law and asked if she wanted to submit a chemical test of her breath, to which the Arrest replied, “Fuck no. I’m drunk. I ain’ stupid.” And she added that I didn’t matter anyway since she didn’t have a license already.

While #344 catalogued the Arrest’s belongings, she began to cry. She stated that she didn’t mean to, *really*, she’s so so *so* sorry. She knows she’s a failure. “Don’t you think I know!? Don’t you think I know I’m killing myself? I *know*. Because people like me... people like me...” The salty water poured out of her until the Arrest became a puddle right there on the floor in front of the holding room bench. #344 swears to the good Lord above that he saw a baby sea turtle trying to swim on the cement.

#350 and #344 scooped the Arrest up in Dixie cups and put her in blue bucket to dry out.

people you meet in jail

I'm cold sitting against the brick in my paper clothes. Some dyke is yelling into the payphone at her girlfriend to get her out. I want to close my eyes but I'm waiting for someone to come and tell me they made a mistake, that I don't belong here. And I want to be awake for that.

When I open my eyes, I'm lying on a plastic picnic bench and the dyke is gone and the only sound I hear is the hollow broadcast of Mob Wives on the television hanging behind plexiglass. There is a girl sitting across from me, staring up at the protected television to give her eyes something to do. She is barefoot, wearing sweatpants and an orange t-shirt and she smells like something that reminds me of the library I used to go to as a kid. I think of the books and all the people who left themselves behind on them. She looks down into her Styrofoam cup like it is some crystal ball. Without me asking, she gives me her reading of how this world works. Once they get you, they got you forever, she says. It'll all be over soon though, she says. Six years of running away has finally run her down. She paces, telling me she left her children in Oklahoma with their grandma. By the time I see 'em again they'll be all grown. Won't even know me as their mother, she says. But she's gonna make it better. She gnaws at the side of her finger. She looks down into

her cup and sees their resentment. But she doesn't feel it yet. She's still high. She unwraps her processed cinnamon roll and takes a bite. She explains between chewing that she had it good once. Working in pharmaceuticals. In Wal-Mart. Worked my way up, she says. Used to be a real hard worker, she says. She takes another bite and goes back to not watching Mob Wives.

When I wake up again, I'm on a blue metal bunk. My arms are still sleeping under me in a futile attempt to generate warmth. I can feel bruises forming on my cheeks, my shoulders, my hipbones. A new woman is pacing under the protection of Mob Wives, waving her arms in the air, the fat on the back of them flapping, making her look like a bird trying to fly. She's praying quietly yesss geez-sus geez-sus, thank ya geez-sus, praise praise geez-sus. Over and over. Lips praying, tears falling, fat flapping. I get up and go look out the window to try and gain a sense of location. There is a clock tower. It is early afternoon. It must be Sunday because the singing woman was picked up on her way home from church. Didn't even know I had a warrant, she says. She looks at me and says softly God sees you baby, he still loves you, ain't nothing you can do to get away from geez-sus, amen, amen. The whites of her eyes are the color of thin egg yolks. Now she's clapping her hands, stomping and laughing and yelling praise praise like we're about to have a revival. The girl in orange is turning over on her bunk while someone pees in the toilet next to her head. I lay down on the plastic bench again, listening to the wives scream at each other. I likely no longer have a job.

When they come in to clean the cell, shouting “man on floor,” we get locked together, watching as they pour cleaner heavy with a fake pine smell into the toilets, over the floors, across the bunks. A barely baptism. The wives approve. They give us more feminine pads and toilet paper, which we use as pillows. It’s best to try and sleep the whole time. The egg-eyed songbird is up on her bunk, singing and crying and patting her head. The make-believe mother psychic is reeking and pacing and chewing her skin. I’m turning over, trying to find a position on the metal that won’t leave a mark.

falling asleep in studio

The beginning is a little hazy. I am at someone's house. It is an old house—reminds me of my grandmother's or that one house I stayed at in Ohio two years ago when I took too much Tylenol and was sick all night. It's all dark wood floors and dark wood cabinets and dark green carpet. Soft yellow light hovers over the countertops. There are people having a dinner. They are laughing and talking quietly in a room I don't see. They are familiar, though I can't recall in this moment how I know them. I don't know why I'm there, but they act like I'm supposed to be, so I go with it. A girl leads me to the garage. It smells like garages smell—wet wood and oil and garbage. She gets me a drink from the fridge, complaining about a boy inside. Time passes and a mother is cleaning dishes. The girl and her little sister and I are sitting at the table, laughing. The sister asks if I want to see something. I think I hear her say, "I have some weed in the garage." I'm not really interested, but I am curious as to why someone who looks about ten would have weed so I follow her. She takes me to the corner and begins to cautiously and quietly build a barricade around us, trying not to draw the attention of her mother coming out with trash bags from dinner. We stand like two haunted portraits, following her movements with our

eyes. She goes back inside and we breathe. The sister kneels down and pries out a huge piece of the cement ground and rummages through a hole underneath. She brings up a large plastic bag. It's not weed. It's something else. "Have you ever met a witch before?" "No. They scare me." "Would you like to become a witch?" I tell her I think I'm ready to leave now. Her face is changing, dark liquid flowing from her nose. The lights are diming. She grabs my arms and pulls them into the hole and holds them there. It feels like when, after you've been sitting in the same position for too long and then stretch your legs—at first you feel nothing, but after a little while, spikes start running under your skin, twisting back and forth, until it becomes so unbearable, you get cold and goosebumpy. "Find what you're looking for." Her voice sounds like the inside of a conch shell. I begin to scream but she only tightens her grip on my arms.

I wake up on an old dirty couch that's been forgotten in the studio. I know I need to get up but I can't feel my arms. My brain tells my left hand to lift itself but it refuses. I hear commotion outside, like it's the fourth of July, so I force my body to fall to the floor. Now I am outside and the sky looks as if it's confused about whether it wants to be dusk or dawn and the air is cool yet humid and the people are frisky, believing it's the end of the world, running across the streets without looking both ways, kissing each other openly in public, but I'm stuck in the grass dragging myself like a snake through the dew, leaving a trail of hopeless body parts—a foot, a knee, a thigh, a bellybutton—while a girl sings a crappy pop song I know from the radio, strumming out of sync on her guitar, the sound bouncing off the buildings, getting tangled in traffic as I reach the curb and notice I have

nothing left of me but my arms.

walking to my (not) girlfriend's apartment

I'm walking down the street minding my own goddamn business. I'm going to this girl's house. We used to date, but we aren't right now, but I want to again, cause I'm trying to be better and I don't know what the fuck is good for me. So I'm walking and this guy is coming up the sidewalk in the opposite direction, which is no big deal, cause it's a fucking sidewalk and we'll move out of each other's way cause that's what people do, right? But when we finally get close enough to each other, he doesn't fucking move. He walks right up to me. Which I think it's weird cause he doesn't look lost or homeless, though I suppose that doesn't mean he isn't but then I feel something hard push into my chest and I look down. He's got a gun on me and he's like, "Give me your backpack." And I don't remember doing it, but I have my hands up like somehow that's gonna make him change his mind and my fucking dumbass is like, "Oh I'm sorry but I can't do that." Real calm like I just stepped on his toes while trying to squeeze past him on the bus. Like I said, I don't know what the fuck is good for me. And of course, he's like, "You think I'm playin?" and he moves the gun up so he's pointing it at my head.

And I don't think he's playing. At all. I'm actually thinking about his physical characteristics in case I need to describe him to the police. I'm thinking about my thesis, which is a shitty re-imagination of the last statements of Christ on the cross, which has consumed my life for the last however long, which is my only reason for existing right now, and which happens to only exist on the hard drive in my backpack. But dumbest of all fucking dumb thoughts, I think, is this dude's gun ain't loaded. His finger's on the trigger. And I don't know much about guns but I know triggers are sensitive things. "I'm sorry but I can't do that." My hands are still up.

He scoffs like, "This bitch..." and grabs my shoulder strap and pulls, but we just turn 180 degrees in a swing dance. He jostles me like I'm a tree he hopes to shake fruit from and looks down at me cause we're on an incline and again he says, "Give me your backpack." And now I really think the guns not loaded. Or the safeties on. Or it's fake and I just can't tell cause I've only shot a gun once, back in the desert where I grew up with some friends who claimed it was their God-given right dammit, but who were just bored really.

"I'm sorry." Real slow. "But I can't do that." My hands are still up. He's still holding on to the shoulder strap but he's not trying to pull me anywhere anymore. We're both just kinda standing there like it's the awkward end of a first date, both of us waiting for the other to make a move. Then he goes, "You know what? Imma let you go. You got a lot of heart." Like this is some big brother/big sister moment, like it was all just a prank, shaking his gun at me as if to say "You really got me this time." We both turn

apprehensively and start walking away, but then I think I hear him double back with quick footsteps, so I run-walk the three houses to the apartment of the girl I used to date, who I want to be better for because I don't know what's good for me and I take the steps two at a time and collapse through the door and once I explain to her what happened and stop crying, she tells me to call the police, but I'm like what does it matter anyway.

eight babies

Leather Jacket comes to my house, drunk, to help me build a fort. I'm sitting at the top of the stoop drinking Red Bull and smoking a cigarette. It's three in the morning. He falls to the second step of the porch stairs like a baby. He tells me about his girlfriend, about how she'd rather go get drunk with her friends than hang out with him. How's that supposed to make a guy feel, ya know? I mean like, I wanna be with someone I can love and who will love me back, ya know? People think that like I'm just some bad ass who doesn't giveashit. But I giveashit. He pulls a flask from the inside of his leather jacket.

I've slept a total of ten hours this week and it is taking all my synthetic energy to get through tonight and into tomorrow, when I begin filming my thesis. But I still need to build a fake, portable lighthouse and rewrite the script and make this fucking fort in my living room. He lights another cigarette. It's like growing up, you know, my dad wasn't around and my mom was all focused on taking care of all the babies—

The babies?

Yeah my mom ran a daycare so there was always like... eight babies running around my house. Like I would wake up and there would just be babies everywhere. God, I hated those fucking babies. I'd be like, mom I have to go to school; mom I need some food... but she'd just be taking care of those babies. Like I basically had to take care of myself. His eyes are bloodshot. He turns away from me and looks down at the ground.

We met last semester. I was shooting a different short and strangely, he was the only man in art school willing to get in a shower, naked, on camera. He had recently lost a lot of weight and was self-conscious about his body. He told me not to look. But I had because I was twenty-seven and had never seen a penis in real life.

But I mean, I love my mom. She put up with a lotta shit, ya know? I mean like she did her best. I am suddenly very aware of her body – of my leg bouncing up and down, of my heart beating too fast, of the third cigarette singeing my fingers. He laughs.

What?

It's just funny, ya know? I haven't thought about those fucking babies since like forever. Like I hated those babies. Like they took my mom from me, ya know? But like right now. Like *right now*... God I miss those fucking babies. Like babies love you no matter what dude. Like they're just always so excited when you walk in the room. Babies always love you. Like they don't care what you've done, what you look like, what problems you think

you have. They just love you cause you're there, ya know? Fuck dude, I never thought I'd miss those fucking babies, but I do. I miss those fucking eight babies so much.

He's laughing with his head in his hands, rubbing his eyes like he's trying get something out of them. I light a forth cigarette.

the nothing something

It clung to her like a fabric sheet to nylons. The wetness of living dripping from faces that watched feet shuffling, through fragments of freshly cut grass falling across sidewalks, dragging the last loaf of bread over the metal gate of the top shelf of aisle twelve. Numb she said. That's what she wanted. Freedom. So she stripped herself of everything—the bread and the grass and the faces and her father and mother and the skin that made her and the muscles that gave in and the fat that warmed her and the nerves that told her when and the bones that fractured and the marrow that wasn't anything more than marrow. Finally she said. Just what she wanted. Nothing. And the nothing days turned into nothing weeks turned into nothing months turned into a nagging child tugging at her hollow hip, biting at her voided breast, pulling at her no-longer-there-hair. And yet. She fed that baby nothing and carried it upon her missing shoulders, where the child silently babbled into her absent ears. She loved nothing, and nothing loved her. Until one empty night, after soothing the noiseless cries of nothing, she decided it was time to put that baby to bed.

do you think you could do that?

He doesn't look at me while he speaks. Or maybe I'm not looking at him. He reminds me of my father. A serious man behind thin-rimmed glasses. Not that my dad wears thin-rimmed glasses. And I'm holding back laughter cause I'm not good at reacting appropriately. I'm nervous. Just a thousand words, he says. It doesn't even need to be a cohesive story. I open my mouth but. I don't know what to say.

I had these exercise sheets when I was a kid learning to write. Lines ran across the page – solid, dashed, solid, space, solid, dashed, solid. At the beginning of the line-sections, there was a printed letter, both uppercase and lower case, that I was supposed to copy. I would sit for hours drawing, erasing, drawing, erasing, drawing, erasing trying to get every letter perfect. What I got was a lot of holes in my papers. The teachers started sending me home with extra sheets.

Another time, when I was still young enough to take naps, we were making these construction-paper chains to count the days until Christmas. I was sitting toward the back

of the class at a round table with small rectangles of red and green laid out before me. The teacher showed us how to glue the two short ends of the strips together to create a loop and how to thread another piece of paper through the hole, alternating red, green, red, green. I decided to make my chain red, green, green, red, green, green. "That's not how the teacher told us to do it, is it?" Some classroom mom who looked like an extra on *Dallas* was attempting to stifle my creative genius. I felt discouraged but kept on with red, green, green. "You're not doing it right." Dallas tried to shift some of the strips away from me. I slumped in my chair and started to cry. I raised my small arm and whispered to the teacher that my stomach hurt and I needed to go the nurse. She excused me and when I got to the nurse's office, I asked to call my mom. She picked me up shortly after.

What do you think? he says. I look up briefly to see he's put down his pen and is looking at like I am a child who just threw up a bunch of candy he warned me against eating. I look back down and nod silently to my shoes.

I wrote 416 words and failed the class.

part two

Grace will always be a humiliation for me.

- *Richard Rohr*

long walk home

I've heard it said that grace is not the long walk home but the welcome you receive at the door. Here. I carry my suitcase, heavy with the days of waking up in hospital beds, not knowing how I got there, powder rattling my bones as I sink deep into forest carpet. You call my name from the threshold of that old two-story while I tighten my grip, pants sagging under the weight of carnival tokens I cannot exchange. Pockets full, I drop them into the slot to watch myself dance. Numb-fingered, still grasping the suitcase, spinning while seams are splitting and coins are spilling onto the stage until I fall realizing – the payment of grace is not in the mettle I can muster, but in your footsteps on the porch running to gather me up – a dizzy beggar with broken hands.

cross my heart and hope to die

“I wasn’t trying to kill myself.”

The therapist stops talking abruptly. “I’m sorry?”

“You said, ‘When your parents found you after you tried to kill yourself...’ *I wasn’t trying to kill myself.*”

Ashley looks out the window and down on the newly paved parking lot. She counts twelve white cars, five red, six black, three blue, three beige-y gold and one yellow.

The therapist clears his throat. “What were you trying to do then?”

Despite the air conditioning working overtime to keep the room at the temperature of the inside of a refrigerator, the back of her bare legs stick to the tan fake-leather La-Z-Boy. She hates wearing shorts. Unless they are absolutely necessary and unfortunately, since it is 110 degrees in the middle of April, it is absolutely necessary. She thinks the recliner is an odd substitute for the requisite couch. But it makes sense in the context of things.

Just moments before, he had tried to hypnotize her. He had told her to close her eyes and lean back in the chair and “inhale through your nose, hold, now exhale through your mouth” while he counted back from ten.

“Nine.

Eight.

Seven.

Keep breathing in through your nose,

hold,

out through your mouth.

Six.

You should feel your body getting heavier,

sinking into the chair.

Five.

Sinking into sleep.

Four.

Deeper.

Three.

Deeper.

Two.

And you'll be asleep when I say

One.”

She heard him get up and walk over to her. He lifted her arm by the wrist, and when he let go, she allowed it to fall back to the arm rest so that he would believe she was in fact asleep. After he settled back in his chair, he explained that he was going to help her find a safe place where she could go anytime she felt threatened. He wanted her to “imagine anywhere in the world, or any place not of this world, and fill it with objects and people that make you happy.”

All she saw was a high, gray stone wall.

She shrugs. “I dunno. I’m just.... tired.”

She turns from the window to see him scribble something down on the legal pad he has attached to a clipboard. In an uninvited flash, she imagines him stabbing the pen through his hand, making himself into a sort of half Jesus. She tries to shake the image out of her brain and ends up replacing it with a memory of first grade.

The principal’s son was named... John? No it was Jake. Or maybe Jack? She can’t remember. No one really like him much. He was always chasing the girls in class, acting like he was going to put boogers on them or making fart noises with his mouth when the teacher had her back turned. He thought he was being funny. She sees him now as Sid from Toy Story, even though Toy Story came out 3 years after first grade, and she doubts that’s what he actually looked like. On the day in her memory, he was sitting at a table in the middle of the classroom, staring at his lap. The kids around him were whispering to each other. The teacher, thinking he was being disruptive, snapped at him to stop. A child squealed with laughter.

“Jack peed his pants!”

When the teacher came to check if Jack had indeed wet himself and ask if perhaps his dad had a change of clothes for him in his office? He denied anything had happened. When she tried to get him to stand up and go to the bathroom, he wailed that it wasn’t true, “stop touching me! please! don’t tell my dad... I promise it was an accident... I’m sorry, please don’t make me go!” When she insisted that he needed to go to see his father, Jack grabbed a pencil and started stabbing his temple as hard as his little seven year old fist could force it. A tiny, dark bead of blood slid down his face after about four jabs.

“So you tried to kill yourself because you’re tired?”

The therapist continues to scan the notepad, as if the answer to the question he just asked is hidden somewhere on the yellow paper. Ashley rolls her eyes back to the window. She wonders why the people who are supposed to see clearly don’t even seem to be able to look properly.

Being on the third floor seems unnatural to her. Too high, too *above*. She traces the angular snake of the strip mall around to the farthest edge of the parking lot. There’s a golf car dealership, a liquor store, two Mexican restaurants, an optometrist and Mike’s Custom Window Tinting. Everything is built in single stories, in the same dingy cream khaki color as the sand, as if the buildings themselves were trying to hide from the sun. She imagines them making a pact. “If we look like the sand, perhaps the sun won’t find us. We can blend in, and when he looks down on us, he won’t see us and so we won’t burn up.” Everything is just trying to survive.

my hands

died on April 28th 2014 sometime between 2 a.m. and 7 a.m. The cause of death was undetermined. But it had been a long time comin'. They had a habit of wandering around late at night, getting lost in a stranger's pants or passing out in the backseat of a friend's car. They would crawl back in the morning like Thing, bent as winter tree branches, pawing the door because they had lost their keys. Someone told me they saw my hands float – an iridescent soap-bubble bouncing off brick buildings until they popped, plunging finger-first into dumpster run-off. They woke up sticky and determined to pull themselves together.

it's not the same

She doesn't smoke, but my sister goes outside with me anyway. We haven't seen each other in a year. I feel bad for her and my family – these desert people who have travelled to this frigid midwestern city. It snowed overnight, which my sister told me was every Christmas wish come true. They have all been here before, years ago, in June when I graduated discipleship school. But now it's December. The weather's very different.

My sister is amazed by the snow – the frozenness of it. How is it even possible that it is this freaking cold, she says. It can't be real. She breathes hot breathe into her gloved hands while I walk in circles under a blue awning of an old church. She runs into the street and starts taking pictures of me with her phone. It's gonna look great, she says. You look like a Russian gangster in that coat, she says. Those goddamn ADT signs ruin everything, she says.

She wraps our impromptu photo shoot and comes back to me. How's the weather Boris, she asks. I slap my hands together like a trained seal begging for fish and exhale smoke through my nose. Beeyuetehtfool, I say in a Russian accent that sounds more like Italian.

We sit on the doorstep, pulling our bodies into themselves for warmth. She tells me about France and how they smoke there, holding the cigarette between their thumb and index finger, hiding it in their hand as they bring it to their lips, like they are children, afraid to be caught eating forbidden candy.

When we were little, we would order Dominos and rent a movie from Blockbuster on the weekends. I was afraid to talk to people, so I made her order the pizza, even though I'm older. She knows how to talk to people.

I met this guy once, she says. He was French. He was sleeping on my friend's couch. I met him at a bar that I really want to take you to, I think you'd really like it. One of those real dive-y places that's all red lights and velvet. Dirty and classy in the same breath, you know? Anyway, so my friends and I go to this bar and there's this French guy there, skinny thing with a thin Clark Gable mustache and he's been there for a while, he's got like eight empty Guinness's in front of him. Anyway, after we've all been drinking a while, he takes me and pushes me up against a plush velvet wall—yeah of course it was red—so he pushes me up against this wall and he takes his cigarette like this (she takes mine to demonstrate) and he inhales and leans in real close and he says (she adopts an exaggerated but horrible French accent), “hyu. haar. suemokhen haught.”

She giggles and coughs a little as remnant smoke glides out of her nostrils. I think my ass is frozen, she says. She takes another drag from the cigarette. Do you just want to keep it, I ask. Yeah, she says. This weather's stressing me out.

stop and go

We're going to walk around Lake Merritt. That's what my then-girlfriend's friend tells us when we show up at his Oakland apartment. It's bright out – The sky and grass are California blue and green like I remember from my childhood. We stop at a bakery and grab a couple of cookies, except for Then-Girlfriend, who isn't eating sugar again. The city street smells like city streets smell – all exhaust and sewage and cooking food. People are out like it's not a weekday. My then-girlfriend and her friend are walking up ahead of me. She's clapping her hands, bending over in laughter. I stop to roll a cigarette. They skip across the intersection as the light turns red, leaving me stranded on the other side. We're all heading in the same direction and I can see the sunlight shimmer on the choppy salt water ahead. But still. I watch a pigeon bob its head as it checks the perimeter of a forgotten newspaper rack. A stranger pushes past me as the light changes.

I catch up to my them at the next intersection, standing a few feet away to keep my smoke from drifting in their faces. A woman walks up to me. I don't notice her until she is at my left shoulder, staring at me. I think she's going to ask for money, but she's looking at me like she's trying to find an eyelash she just spotted on my cheek. Her skin

looks like beef jerky –wrinkles deep like bed sheets between fingers. She’s wrapped black – head covered like a nun’s but without the white part. She takes my cigarette-free hand, whispering quietly as she places it against her cheek. It is soft and I am surprised by how cool it is considering the July heat. Seagulls cry overhead. She looks up, raising her free arm to the sky. She looks like the pictures of Jesus I’ve seen printed on candles where he’s pointing to his heart. We stand there still – her still holding my hand, me still holding my cigarette, her still muttering unknown words like a possessed parishioner speaking in tongues, me still silent. She kisses my palm and cups my cheek with her other hand. She smiles like we have just solved world hunger. I swear the sky behind her is bluer than before. And then she turns and crosses the intersection with the crowd.

I jog up to Then-Girlfriend and her friend who are waiting by the lake. They look at me like my pants are down. I take a drag from my cigarette. My then-girlfriend moves closer to the water. I look back at the intersection until the light changes.

on being clean

Your finger ticks against the carpet
and your foot twitches an untied shoe.

You clean out the closet and under the bed,
pull everything from of the cupboards and drawers,
organize and put it back.

Then you do it again.

And once more for good measure.

Just in case.

You sneeze.

You eat three square meals a day.

You eat in between.

You have dessert.

Or don't eat anything. You drink

two pots of coffee. You sleep.

You plan running away to Seattle

but settle for walking circles

around your room. You take up the guitar

but your hands won't move

right. You give church a second chance

but you can't hear from where you sit.

The clock has been given fresh batteries

and you're wading through molasses with swim fins on.

unsubmitted grapevine essay

I couldn't go inside when I came back. Well, that's not entirely true. I did walk inside. But when I heard music and saw a sign saying that there was a celebration for the AA group's thirtieth anniversary, I turned around. I was too hungover for this shit. The last thing I wanted was a party. I'll just come back tomorrow. Maybe... Maybe it didn't fucking matter. I had been in and out of the group over the last year, unable to accept that I was an alcoholic. This would be my seventh time in if I could stay inside the building. Though I still believed it wouldn't work. Twenty-seven having just graduated college by staying dry for a few months, I started drinking again because I had obviously proved I wasn't an alcoholic. But the truth is, I was doing shit I swore up and down I would never do and I was just... tired. I didn't know where else to go. *And* I knew if I left, I wouldn't come back. Because tomorrow would always be tomorrow. So I sat on the steps and actually prayed that God would send someone to notice me while keeping my head down hoping no one would actually notice me. "Hey. I know you." I looked up. A tall, brunette woman was standing in front of me. I remembered her as boisterous, outspoken, blunt. This was not what I meant God. Wrong person. But she kept talking to me. "You coming

to the party?” I don’t remember our conversation. I just remember eventually taking her hand and walking into the building. She sat with me during the speaker meeting. She congratulated me when I got my seventh silver twenty-four-hour chip. She introduced me to other people I vaguely recognized at the potluck after the meeting. She became my first sponsor.

For two years, this was the story I told of how I got sober. But I drank a month later. I went to a wedding in a different state and figured no one would ever know. And no one did until two years later, sitting across from my first sponsee, asking her to be honest with me. I changed my date to the day after the wedding and have been sober for the last eight years. What I’ve learned in those eight years is that *every* step I have taken has been necessary to achieve the sobriety I have today. Sometimes those steps were backwards, walking out rather than in. Sometimes those steps were encouraged and taken with someone holding my hand. Sometimes those steps led to champagne at a wedding reception and sometimes they led to a sponsee in a coffeeshop. It’s super fucking cheesy, but it is my belief that each one, though perhaps stuttered and scared and many times, misguided, have led me to AA and a life where I can walk with my head up, unashamed of who and where I am.

the night before ash wednesday

You find me under an illuminated awning on a dingy street in a bad part of town. It's New York. Or Chicago. Or San Francisco. Everything is bathed in gritty piss yellow and fluorescent green. Like a 70's movie. I stare into the window of a pawn shop. Or a lunch counter. Or a laundromat. I watch a man rearrange the jewelry and flip burgers and pull his underwear out of the dryer, shaking them before placing them in a basket. I refocus on my reflection. I am holding the right side of my lower abdomen. Blood seeps through my fingers. I watch through the window as you get out of a taxi and hold the door open. You expect me to turn and get in. I don't remember calling you. I don't remember getting shot. You tell me to go to the hospital. I look down, slowly pulling my hand away from my body. Blood pulses and drips onto the waist of my bell bottoms. I hook a finger inside the wound and twist it around. I need a bathroom.

We walk. A few sagging people hold themselves up by holding up the brick buildings, smoking cigarettes to the sound of distant police sirens and disco. No one looks at us. You wrap your arm around my elbow, like we're in love. Like we're wandering around a

park on a quiet Sunday. Like we still have time. I probe deeper in the wound, to where my fingers meet, but only feel my gallbladder. Or my liver. Or my large intestine. Blood oozes out with every movement. We turn a corner. It smells like gasoline and shitty weed. The asphalt reflects white and neon pink and blue light. It must have rained. We splash through puddles of iridescent oil and find the bathrooms on the side of the mini-mart. The women's is locked so we go into the men's. You grab frantically at paper towels and hand me the wad but I push your hand away. You don't understand why I'm doing this. Most of my hand is in the wound, blood wrapping its fingers around my wrist. I have to pee.

I use my other hand to press on the outside of my skin, feeling for the hard little bullet. The pit of a peach. The pearl I didn't ask for. You pace. You yell. You tell me I don't know what I'm doing. You cry. I am bent over, digging inside, my right elbow jutting out, like a scant model in a perfume ad. Blood eats up my shirt, drools down my pants to my knees. I trace etched graffiti with my eyes. I don't remember how we got here.

And then I find it, tucked behind my pancreas. Or my heart. Or my brain. You are slumped against the greasy tile, soaking in sweat and snot and salt. I pull out my hand and extend it to you, wanting you to see but you turn away. I bring it to my face, rolling it over in my palm, wet and plump and squishy and pop it in my mouth, eating it like a grape.

the first time

We notice the knocking late Friday night. “What is that?” “I don’t know.” “It’s coming from over here.” She moves toward the door of our two-bedroom apartment., craning her neck upward. “Maybe Lewis is drunk.” “Doing some late-night repairs?” She shuffles into the florescent kitchen. I snap another puzzle piece in place. “What time is it?” “Who cares.” She puts her mug in the sink. “Almost midnight.” We’ve just finished another movie – something far away and full of action – the monotony of involuntary agoraphobia keeping us on a flat rollercoaster track of bedroom, kitchen, couch – our conversations equally invigorating. “You coming to bed?” “I’m gonna try and finish this puzzle tonight.” “Whatever.” She goes to the bedroom, leaving the door cracked like an invitation. I fill up my mug with more frozen mango and sit back on the floor where the beginning of a somewhere else morning sky is halfway pieced together. I select a show I’ve already watched twice and press play. “Do you think you could use headphones tonight?” She looks at me through the opening, soft living room light illuminating her face. “Yep.” It comes out shorter than I intend. She closes the door louder than usual. Lewis continues his apartment renovations.

He's still knocking in the morning. We don't notice at first because the coffeemaker chugs loudly as it brews. "Still?" "I mean, maybe he didn't finish?" She pours coffee and takes the half and half from the fridge. "We're going to need to order more groceries." "You know I don't mind going out and getting groceries..." "You know we're not doing that because of my mom." I sip my coffee to keep myself from reminding her that we have no plans to interact with her mother anytime soon. "You know Bens coming over tomorrow for donuts." "Since when?" She's boiling water for oatmeal. "Since we talked about it a few days ago because I haven't seen my best friend in forever." She scoffs, stirring cinnamon into the bubbling water. "I'm going downstairs to smoke." "Uh-huh. You know it's worse if you're a smoker?" I grab my coat and go outside and watch as my gray exhale hangs on the heavy early September air.

By Sunday morning, we're developing new theories. "Maybe it's not Lewis?" She comes out of the bathroom, still brushing her teeth. "Or he's still drunk?" She takes a glass from the drying rack and walks back to the bathroom. I hear her spit. "I mean... fuck it. The world is ending, might as well." I open a cupboard and stare at the ten cans of corn, five-pound bag of beans and twenty-five-pound sack of rice she had me order yesterday. "Maybe it's a raccoon? Like last year when they were crawling all in the roof." She comes back into the kitchen. "Raccoons with their little hammers?" She cackles. "Laaaaura?" My ninety-five-year-old landlord's sunbaked voice mispronounces my name from the apartment hallway. "Laaaaura?" I open the door. No one is there. "Betty?"

“Oh Laura, up here.” She’s standing on the landing in front of Lewis’ apartment. “Can you come up here. It’s Lew. He fell.” “Just a sec.” I slip on some shoes. My partner looks at me confounded. “Shouldn’t we just call 911? What are *you* even gonna do?” And I am up the stairs.

Lewis lies face down in the entryway. A slipper remains on the black and white checker linoleum of the kitchen. His open robe pools over him and his hands are bent above his head like he’s swimming breaststroke. Betty is in the back room calling 911. The apartment smells like the American Legion bar my grandfather worked at when I was a child – old cigarette smoke and skin and stagnant mop water. I kneel down and gently rub his back. “Who’s that?” His diluted voice bounces off the wall he’s facing. “It’s Lauren. From downstairs.” “Oh Lauren. Oh thank goodness. I tried knocking as loud as I could. This was all I could reach.” He grasps a hollowed-out bull horn in his fragile, freckled left hand. “I thought surely someone would hear me. But no one came.” I suddenly realize I’m not wearing a mask. I think about going downstairs to get one, but leaving now feels like leaving a bird with a broken wing. “Whaaaaat? No I’m the landlord.” Betty yells information into the receiver. I continue to rub Lew’s back. “I thought I was going crazy. I thought maybe no one could hear me. Maybe there’s no one there.” “Lewis, I am *so* sorry. We heard you. We just thought you were hammering.” “Hammering?” “Yeah like doing repairs or something.” “Oh.” He coughs out a quiet wet laugh. “I guess I can see how that would sound like that.” His pale, translucent leg twitches. “My knee hurts.” “Does anything else hurt?” Some old lifeguard training kicks

in. “Well, no. I don’t think so. My face is a little sore. Can you roll me over?” “I’m sorry Lew I can’t do that in case something is really broken. We’re going to have to wait for the paramedics.” “Oh... okay.” My right foot has fallen asleep. I look around the apartment.

The front room is all pink and plants. Salt lamps next to cacti in delft vases. A Japanese nature print on each wall. There’s a record player in a small alcove with more plants. Next to us are baskets full of western tchotchkes – stir ups, red rocks, bull horns. A piece of cowskin covers a table holding a bowl of keys and pennies and a painted aluminum plate that has the word HOWDY spelled out in lasso. Next to the bathroom there is another table full of miniature porcelain figurines. In the middle sits a framed drawing of Cher.

“Oookay an ambulance is on its way.” Betty hobbles back to the front. “But gosh, don’t they want to know everything about you.” Her focus turns to Lewis. “Lew, now why weren’t you using your walker? You’re always *supposed* to use your walker.” “I think I’m gonna run downstairs and get a mask.” I stand to leave, shaking my foot, stumbling down the steps as Betty continues to scold the man who is not her son.

“Ben wants to know what kind of donuts you want.” She follows me, phone in hand, as I rush into the bedroom looking for my mask. “Uh... I don’t know. The fluffy one. With sugar or sprinkles or something.” I rummage through the top drawer of my dresser for the

mask she insisted we both had to have – some thick-ass-neoprene-sub-micron-HEPA-filtered-“bang-on-trend”-backordered-two-months-from-England-expensive-as-fuck mask. I’ve only worn it once. “You’re going back up there?” I loop back on our imaginary track to the door. “The paramedics are on their way.” “Great so why even go back up there? He’s not your responsibility.” I stand with my hand on the doorknob and my back facing her. “I don’t know. But he was on the floor for three days and I just—” I strap the mask around the base of my neck and walk out.

Someone bangs on the building door. I let the two police officers in. They’re all blue – blue latex gloves, blue masks, starched blue short-sleeve shirt with blue under shirts. “Where is he?” “Third floor.” We walk in a line up the crowded steps. Small bookcases and tables and cupboards sit against every wall housing forgotten garden hose nozzles and empty Glade PlugIn plug ins, missing vacuum attachments and paper towels. “Can we move this stuff? Cause we’re probably going to need to move this stuff to get him out. I shrug. “I’m sure it’s fine.”

When we get inside, one officer kneels down by Lewis and the other begins asking me questions. “How long has he been like this?” I cross my arms and rock side-to-side. “I’m not sure exactly. We noticed the knocking Friday night.” “We?” “My partner and I live downstairs.” We’re standing in the pink plant room. I look over her shoulder as the other officer pushes gently along Lew’s back. “Do you know if he takes any medication?” I shake my head. “Maybe he took too much?” I shake my head. “Does he drink?” I shrug.

“Maybe? But we only think that cause he likes to listen to basketball games and jazz really loud late at night.” Her eyes stare at me unamused. “Has he lived here long?” “I mean, pretty sure he’s been here for a while, but he was taking care of his mom for a long time so I just met him a few years ago.” Static cracks through the radio strapped across her shoulder. “*How do you get in this place?*” She turns to her partner, who is squeezing down Lew’s leg. “I’m going to let them in and clear the hallway.” I stare down at my shoes. “Do you need anything else from me?” she doesn’t look back as she walks out the door. “You’re good to go. Thanks.” I look at Betty, who is looking down at Lew. “Imma go back downstairs...” She shoos at me. “Okie dokie. Bye-bye.”

I peel off my mask and take a deep breath. “Go wash your hands. Don’t touch anything.” She points to the bathroom without looking up from her computer. I bow, resting my elbows on my knees and cradle my head in my palms while pressing on my eyes. “Ben’s gonna be here soon.” Blood rushes to my ears as I stand. I throw my mask on the couch. She picks it up like a dirty diaper and flings it on the floor. “Fucking disgusting.” I check my phone when I get out of the bathroom. “*Bro did your landlord just die!?*” Followed by, “*Come down. Bring a lighter.*” I walk back into the living room. “Ben’s here.”

The sun is bright but its warmth procrastinates. An ambulance is double parked with silent lights flashing. Ben paces – a box of LaMar’s donuts in one hand and his vape in the other. “They didn’t have any sugar or sprinkle or yeast so I improvised.” We position ourselves as the points of an awkward scalene triangle. I light a cigarette and fill him in

on the last seventy-two hours. “Damn dude.” Measured thuds spill down the stairwell and out the front door. “Okay lift. Down. Lift. Down.” Lewis is strapped to a seated stretcher like he’s furniture – feet secured to a footrest, arms crossed over his chest like a mummy. A purple bruise flourishes under his right eye, swelling his cheek and forcing him to squint. They roll him out from under the porch shadow. He gasps in a whimper. “Oh! Isn’t the sun *just* lovely?”

sign = signifier + signified

When I see my single toothbrush

in the cup

in the cupboard

above the sink

where we would spit,

It doesn't add up, even

though it's been two weeks.

A sign of us

without a "u." A signifier

of a slowly settling

ship. A strawberry

shivering in my stomach –

something safely swallow.

A scarf sizzling

against my skin.

A shoring snake-shell

stealing a signified's

strength. A sibilant symbol

so small and slight

smothered under sheets

smelling of softener and sweat.

A saccharine song I sing alone.

everything is okay

She wakes to birds chirping and smells wet wood. It must have rained. Sunlight spills through the split slats of the treehouse. Her body is stiff from sleeping on the floor. She doesn't remember coming into the treehouse and is struck with the panic she used to feel after a night of drinking. It's a panic she hasn't felt in two years.

Slowly, she brings herself to her elbows. The cool April morning refuses to leave winter. She yawns and stretches toward the ceiling, twisting her body to break off the clinging bits of sleep. She leans back on her hands and immediately feels a shocking pain shoot through her arms and into her throat and down to her feet and she jolts forward, seeing white flashing lights and tasting stomach acid.

She looks at her hands. What she sees are stumps. The skin is gathered together like her arms are balloons a clown tied off to prep for making balloon animals. Like hot dogs. There is a crispy black quarter-size scab on the ends. When she was younger, her mother would warn her about wearing hair ties around her wrists. "You fall asleep with those on and they'll cut off your circulation and your hands will fall off."

She looks around. The treehouse is littered with weathered magazines and leaves, old Barbie and Power Ranger dolls. Curled, faded posters of Josh Hartnett and the Backstreet Boys hang on the walls. She hasn't been in here for years. She catches her reflection in a broken mirror. Something that looks like dirt is smeared on her face. Drying blood stains her boxers and the wood underneath her. A hatchet lies next to her. So not hair ties then.

She feels dizzy as she brings her legs under her and rises to her knees. *Is she hungover?* No. *Honestly?* No. She slowly stands, ducking the deteriorating ceiling and makes her way through the small door. Thank God her father built a wooden ladder for the treehouse instead of just tying up rope. She descends like a baby - plopping her butt down each rung, using her elbows for stabilization until she reaches the last step.

She pushes the sliding glass door open with her arm and is met with the smell of rose candles, bacon and acrylic powder. She and Matthew had a house like this, except theirs smelled of pine, garlic and alcohol. She is hungry and wants coffee. She hears nail polish bottles clink as her mother sets up the office for the day. Brenda will be arriving soon to prep her hair station. They went into business after she and her brother moved out. "Rent is just *so* expensive these days and we have all this room now."

She moved back in after she and Matthew split. No. More honest. After *she* broke it off with Matthew. She pinches the handle of a mug between her wrists and carefully sets it on the counter. It wasn't her drinking or her cheating. And that was the problem. They had become too comfortable in the dysfunction. And he was never going to do anything different. Because *he* didn't need to. So she ended it one morning before he left

for work. He looked at her, not with sadness or relief. Just acceptance. And she was terrified.

She is still terrified. After multiple failed attempts, she gets a coffee pod into the Keurig and hits one of the brew buttons. Now for food. She opens the pantry door with her elbow and looks for a granola bar or beef jerky... Anything single serve that she can open with her teeth and just shove in her mouth.

“Hope Marie Geringer what in the *actual hell?*” She feels twelve. She forgot that her backside is covered in blood.

“You look like Carrie from the movie *Carrie.*”

She turns to her mother. “No I don’t. And you don’t need to say ‘from the movie *Carrie.*’ You can just say ‘you look like Carrie.’ I get the reference.”

Her mother smiles tightly and begins drinking the coffee that has just finished brewing. “So. Why are you standing in my kitchen covered in blood? I thought we were done with this kind of behavior.”

Hope finds a box of Thin Mints and pulls it to her chest. She sets it on the counter and raises her arms to her mother.

“Well. I really don’t know how you get yourself into these situations.” The doorbell rings and her mother turns.

“Wait! Can you start me another cup of coffee?”

Her mother continues walking as the doorbell chimes again. “You’re thirty years old Hope. I think you’re capable of making your own cup of coffee. And make sure you close the pantry door.” Hope pulls a sleeve of cookies from the box with her teeth and

goes to her room.

When she and her brother moved to college, their rooms were converted into more “functional” spaces. Her brother’s room became the office and her room became a storage closet. Boxes of files, cotton balls, orange wood sticks and acrylic nails line the wall with bins of toner, dye, plastic bowls and smocks. Her bed is pushed up against the wall with cheesy motivational pillows lining its edge. “Be - YOU - tiful.” “Choose Joy.” “DREAM BIG.” “Believe, Achieve, Succeed.” “Have an Attitude of Gratitude.” Every night she throws these words on the floor and every morning she picks them up, placing them neatly back on the bed. And here they all are, lying on the carpet. So the plan was to sleep in her bed last night. She drops the cookies on the bed and scoops the pillows up

like sticks, putting them against the wall. The backside of one catches her eye.

That doesn't make any sense. She turns the pillow over and sets it down. Her arms are sore. She needs to get out these dirty clothes, pee, take a shower. All of which feels impossible. She picks up the cookies and tears the package open with her teeth. Half

TO DO:

- with* _____
- _____
- what?* _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- yo(osrdwlaeth)u* _____

the sleeve spills out onto the bed. She tries to pour one out of the plastic and into her

mouth but it gets stuck. Fuck it. She bends down and eats one off the comforter.

She's embarrassed. Not because she is sucking girls scout cookies off a floral bedspread from the nineties, or because she is covered in her own blood - she's done worse and been covered in worse. But by the situation as a whole. By living at her parents in a room of useful but unused things. By being thirty without a sense of direction or purpose while everyone else acted like they got *it*.

She wipes the crumbs onto the floor and goes to the bathroom. She undresses easily and turns the water on with her elbow. Even if she can't properly wash herself, it'll at least be good to rinse off. She looks at the toilet and decides to pee in the shower. She checks under the sink for some latex gloves to cover the ends of her arms but can't find any. It doesn't matter. They'd likely rip or fall off anyway. Maybe Vaseline? But her wrists are too big to fit into the jar. She'll just have to be careful not to let the scabs peel off.

She steps in the shower and just stands, letting the water run through her hair. She spits and watches red flow down her legs and pool into pink at her feet. There's a curious feeling at the tips of her arms where the water drips off of them. Something like being tickled in the same spot for too long so that it kind of starts to hurt but also itch but also go numb. It's the first time all morning she feels normal. She decides to go for a walk later.

* * * * *

The day has broken free of its winter coat. There is a slight breeze and thin clouds, like old lady hair, drift across the sky. People are out walking their dogs and she hears children

screaming playfully in backyards. She looks at the houses and imagines dishes being washed and laundry being folded. Food being prepared and food being eaten. Arguments being yelled and apologies being kissed.

She was able to find joggers and an old pair of slip-on Vans to wear, which made getting dressed relatively easy. She'll have to call into work . And say what? "You see... the thing is... I don't have hands anymore?" Phones, menus, plates, forks, knives... All things that feel foreign now. With much effort, she was able to get her phone in her pocket before she left the house, though she's not sure why. Texting is a no-go and she's not even sure she can make a phone call. At least it opens with her face.

She keeps her arms tucked into her hoodie and stares at the ground while she walks. She paces her steps so that she doesn't step on the cracks - an old habit from childhood she's never been able to break. Habits are strange things. Never something you notice when they are developing. Only something you pay attention to when you're trying to get rid of them. She wants a cigarette.

She looks up and sees a small neighborhood library. There are a couple Ketogenic cookbooks, some Watchtower pamphlets, a few children's books that look to be from the sixties and multiple romance novels of the grocery store variety. The title of one book interests her and she opens the door. *Herself Surprised* by Joyce Cary. She tries to pull it out but it falls face down on the sidewalk. She bends down to read the back. "Comedy and tragedy always run together, and Cary's great comic gifts are never better deployed than when he is searching out human frailty and the tragedy that heightens our poetic awareness." She tries to pick it up but only gets about half its pages between her wrists. A piece of paper falls out and floats to

the ground.

$\forall f(u) \triangleq \text{thing}$

What the fuck? She goes to scoop the paper back into the book but it sticks to her arm where it is bleeding slightly from scrapping it against the sidewalk. She feels her phone vibrate and shoves the paper into her pocket and pushes her phone out onto her arm on the other side. It's her sponsor, Megan. It takes a couple tries, but she's able to slide it open with her wrist. Without thinking, she lifts the phone to her ear, causing it to fall on the ground.

"Fuck." She gets the phone turned face up and puts Megan on speaker.

"-llllloooooo? Hooo-oope? Are you there?"

Hope is crouched over the phone. "Hiyeahsorry I dropped you. Can you hear me?"

Megan's voice is bright and crisp. "Yeah I can hear you. You good? You sound out of breath."

"No I'm fine. I'm just... I don't know... I was just in the middle of something." A man with a white Pomeranian gives Hope a disapproving look as he walks past her. She gives him a sarcastic smile and nods hello.

"Okay. Well I just wanted to let you know I'm going to be a little late to our meeting today. Like more like five thirty instead of five. Would that still work for you?"

Shit. "Yep. Yeah that's fine." Shitshitshitshit.

"Awesome! Well then I will see you later. Don't forget you're twelve and twelve!"

"I won't. See ya later. Bye."

Hope sits on the sidewalk. She's been in the program for two years and she's

never made it past Step One. No. More honest. She switched sponsors, so even though she's gone through the steps before, she started over because "this isn't something you graduate from" according to Megan. But most honest? She doesn't want to meet. She doesn't want to go through any steps. She doesn't want to be an alcoholic. She doesn't want to be *here*.

She gets her phone onto her lap and maneuvers it back into her pocket. She stands with the book under her arm and walks home.

* * * * *

She arrives at the coffeeshop before Megan and sits on the patio. She is afraid to go inside. The thought of trying to pass payment to the barista, of trying to grab a cup, of spilling coffee everywhere - it's too overwhelming. So she just rocks back in her chair, waiting.

Megan shows up after a few minutes. "Hey hi sorry. You been here long?" She puts down her books. "Did you get something to drink yet?"

Hope shakes her head. "No not yet."

Megan motions to the cafe. "Come on then. It'll be my treat."

They go inside and are wrapped up in the smell of coffee grounds and commercial cleaners and warm milk. Megan approaches the counter and smiles at the barista.

"Hi." She looks back at Hope. "What do you want?"

Hope is standing with her arms crossed over her chest, staring intently at the menu though she always orders the same thing. "Medium Americano. And can you put a little heavy cream in it?"

She doesn't want to play games. At least this one makes a little sense. "Searching for something in you." Still. This is getting annoying.

"Hey. I got the drinks. You ready?" Megan is pushing the door open with her butt.

"Yeah I'll be out in a sec." Hope goes over to the condiment bar and tries to discreetly pull a straw from one of the metal canisters on the counter. It tips over, spilling all over the floor.

"Shit! I'm so sorry. I—" She bends down and tries to scoop them up.

"It's okay. We're slow. I'll get it. You go out there with your friend." The barista moves around the bar.

"Um... okay. Sorry." She takes a straw between her wrists and leaves.

Megan looks at her with concern as she sits down. "You cold?"

"Huh?"

"You got your hands inside your sleeves. Are you cold? Cause we can go inside."

Shit. "No I'm... not cold. I'm..." Hope sets the straw on the table. She looks down, like she's returning a precious jewel that she stole and doesn't want to be seen. She puts her elbows on the table and extends her arms, revealing her missing hands.

Megan sits up quickly. "Ohmygod Hope! What... what happened?" She laughs slightly, a sign of discomfort rather than humor.

Hope takes a deep breath. "I don't know. I woke up this morning and my arms were like this. I don't remember."

"Did you relapse?"

Fair question. "No. No I just don't remember."

“Well... Did you call the police? Have you been to a doctor?” Megan’s tone is more aggressive.

It surprises Hope. “I mean, it’s missing hands, not a missing person, so... I don’t know what the police would do. And same thing with the doctor, like, what’re they gonna do? They can’t grow me new hands, so...” She slumps back in her chair.

“It’s called prosthetics Hope.”

But she doesn’t want prosthetics. She doesn’t want a fake appendage - a representation of something that was real. She just wants her hands.

They both stare into their coffees.

“Ooo! You could get a hook like a pirate.” Megan is sunny again.

Hope is not amused. “Can we just read?”

“Yes. Let’s read.” Megan reaches over and put her hand on her arm. “Hope. If there’s anything I can do, you tell me, okay?”

She looks down. There’s a fly in her coffee. She doesn’t say anything.

“So the spiritual principle behind Step One is honesty.” Megan begins to read. “Who cares to admit complete defeat...”

* * * * *

She is exhausted and starving by the time she gets home. Her body has become heavy throughout the day and a soreness, like that of an old bruise, has set into her arms. She opens the back door with an elbow and is met with the scent of garlic, taking her back to Matthew.

He had been her best friend. But he was the type of friend who wouldn’t tell you

when something was stuck in your teeth. He never acknowledged the brokenness of things. Because for him, nothing was ever really broken - it had just entered a different state of being. This perspective was what initially attracted her to him, but it soon became tedious. Because for her, things did break. And broken things needed to be fixed. She had known this, but had buried it under him, under the alcohol, under her own complacency.

She watches her mother set the table, where her father sits reading the paper. It was an odd habit, to read the news after it was no longer new. “Don’t want to *start* my day with that shit.”

Her mother sets a big bowl of pasta on the table. “Hope honey, dinner’s ready. Come sit down.” Her mother and father sit across from each other and she takes her place between them. She watches as they cross themselves and bow their heads.

“Bless us oh Lord and these Thy gifts which we are about to receive through Thy bounty through Christ our Lord Amen.”

She finds herself reciting the words under her breath with them. She doesn’t know why they do it. None of them go to church anymore. Her mother begins plating the pasta.

Her father holds up his plate to be served. “Looks great hun. What is it?”

“Rachel Ray’s Pasta e Piselli from Rachel Ray’s Thirty-Minute Meals. Except I used bacon because I didn’t have pancetta. And frozen peas because I didn’t have fresh.” She scrapes a noodle off the back of the spoon and onto her father’s plate. “And spaghetti because I didn’t have tagaltee or whatever that really fat pastas called and cheddar cheese because I didn’t have parmesan.”

He stabs the pasta. “Well it smells amazing.”

Hope looks at her plate with longing and anger. She leans toward her mother.

“Mom? Can you... help me?”

Her mother passes bread to her father. “Help you with what dear?”

She shows her her arms under the table, looking up at her pleadingly.

“Well what exactly do need from me?” Her mother twirls spaghetti around her fork and eats.

Hope takes a deep breath. “Can you... feed me?”

Her mother drops her fork. “Hope, you are a grown ass woman. You can feed yourself.”

“No. I can’t. I—”

“Hope, really. I think you’re being a bit dramatic. Have you even tried?”

She looks at her father. “Dad?”

“Listen to your mother dear.” He doesn’t look up. He’s concentrating on impaling peas with his fork.

She looks at her mother and then at her plate and then back to her mother.

“Mom?”

Her mother taps the table like she has some exciting news. “Oh by the way, I brought some of your old boxes in from the garage and put them in your room for you to go through. Please do not drag your feet on that Hope. We really need to start getting rid of some things.”

She looks down at her food again and feels tears begin to form. She whimpers as she lowers her face to the plate and takes a bite, pulling the pasta into her mouth with her

tongue, feeling peas smash against her forehead as snot starts to mix with the oil. But she continues taking bite after bite, even as the salt of her overwhelms the plate, eating up all the shame and all the guilt and all the anger and all the fear until there's nothing left.

* * * * *

She was able to get most of the food off her face with the towel from her shower that morning. She sits on her bed, looking at the brown stains her spit had left from eating the cookies directly off the fabric. Maybe things can't be fixed. Maybe this is just the way things are now. Maybe they were always supposed to be like this. No. More honest. Maybe she never deserved her hands. All she used them for was to hold bottles and cigarettes and men. She walked through life with her hands outstretched upright, waiting for someone - everyone - to give her what she felt like she deserved, like the world owed her something. "What you're feeling is real, it just might not be true." So what is true? That her hands decided they'd be more useful a part from her?

She slips the lid off of one of the bins her mother brought in. She's struck with the stagnant scent of dust. Years of her life, held in plastic - kept but forgotten. She pulls each thing out and examines it.

The threadbare teddy bear that she had slept with every night until she was six, when her mother told her that she was too old to sleep with stuffed animals.

The baby blanket she was brought home in.

Photos and photos from middle school and high school. She's dressed as Cindy Lauper in one. In another, she's in her volleyball uniform, posing with a ball on her knee. In another, she's leaning into a boy with greasy hair against the side of a car. He's

holding a beer with his arm around her.

The first bottle of whiskey she finished on her own.

Notes folded into hearts and ticket stubs and unused band stickers cover the bottom of the bin.

There is a brown wooden cigar box under some worn journals with hearts and swirls drawn on the covers. It's not familiar to her. She tries to open it, but the metal clasp is too small for her to get her arm under. She finds a ruler in a drawer and puts the cigar box on the bed, puts the ruler under the clasp and, with one arm holding the box while using the edge of the bed for leverage, pushes on the end of the ruler to pop the clasp open.

Inside, she sees a paper with a message on it that looks like the ones from earlier in the day.

esca(something)pable
signi(and)ficant

And another.

GROUND --- EVERYTHING

The box is full of cryptic messages. She doesn't remember them. None of it seems familiar. No. More honest. They are familiar. In that far away way that a dream is familiar. She knows them. A part of her, someplace deep in her bones, knows what each one means. She turns the pages over. One makes her stop.

This.

She's put it down and goes into the hall. Her parents are watching TV in their room. Still, she moves quietly across the living room to the sliding glass door and gently pushes it open with her elbow.

Remnants of the day cling to the sky. She hears crickets chirping. She smells wet leaves. She goes to the treehouse. She can make out the faint outline of broken earth at the base of the tree. She kneels down, the wet ground slowly soaking through her sweats. She pushes her arms into the dirt and scoops it onto her lap. She begins to dig.

And dig.

And dig.

And dig.

Until she feels the cool soft skin of her palm.

02/25/2022

Because when you walk into the restaurant, I don't understand why
it still hurts. Because it's been a year and I still can't understand why

my skin vibrates with your laugh – a resonant image of a missing wing –
a broken bird playing chicken with an amygdala that cannot see why

you're here. Because, it turns out, it not always a matter of fight or flight.
Because I'm an ostrich, table-perched, pizza-buried, refusing to understand why

I couldn't fly with you. Because flying is hard, but seeing is much harder.
Because when I was a child, I asked god to make me blind to understand why

some people can't see. Because I can't help but examine you through
the head of a new love. Because, is it possible to understand why?

Because, it turns out, time doesn't heal wounds – a broken brain gapping
with a memory – a false Chicken Little subliminally trying to explain why

the sky is falling, though you can't see me. Because my wings are not real –
just a hand tucked in an armpit, flapping someone else's feathers. Because why's

don't matter when wings melt and I'm falling out of the restaurant as you
come to the table. Because nothing would change even if I knew why.

sixtieth

No one sleeps on the plane. It's too early and they've had too much coffee. The last time they all flew together was Hawaii – 22 years ago. Father had surprised Mother and the children in December, bags packed without their knowledge and driven everyone to LAX. It was the first time the children had flown. It was the first time the parents used a time share. It was the first time divorce was threatened. But here they are, adults travelling through a different December into PDX for Mother's sixtieth.

No one sleeps in the car either. Father drives. Mother does her best to navigate. The eldest watches desaturated buildings covered in graffiti blur through the window. The youngest Instagrams. The wipers rhythmically thwap water off the windshield. They need to kill time before Costco opens where they will buy birthday groceries for eight people. They look for a coffee shop. Too many one ways and on-ramps. "Can someone *please* tell me where I'm going!?" "Well just hold on... what was it called again?" "Dad just take this left and follow it around." They arrive and accidently leave the car running because it's a push-start rental and the power button is too far to the right. The coffeeshop is vegan. Father wants a donut. The donut shop doesn't open till Wednesday. They drink coffee with oat milk and bagels with tofu cream cheese. It's still raining when they get back on the road. They let the car direct them to Costco.

Which is a zoo. "Geez Louise, it just opened." "And on a Monday." Father grabs a cart and pushes past exiters eating hot dogs at ten in the morning. The children go look at the

clothes. The youngest needs a coat. "I'll text you when we're checking out." The parents go to gather the food. "Did you want to do their already-made mashed potatoes?" Father makes a face, rubbing his tongue against the top of his mouth like it's coated in oil. "No. Let's do the frozen scalloped ones." "What about this one?" The eldest pulls out a thick, gray denim jacket. "Yeah that's totally the look, but I'm not sure I can pull off an extra-large." They walk around the rack, fingering the fabrics. "Ooo this ones like a pillow." *Where are you guys at? Number 113. I see you.* They check out and load up the car, Father tetrising food on top of bags while the eldest shoves wine bottles between them. "Jesus, do you think that's enough alcohol?" "Maybe. And don't say 'Jesus.'" "Sorry." The rain persists as the rental car's tires whir against wet asphalt. "To grandmother's house we go."

The door to the cedar beach house opens. Aunt squeals at the top of the stairs. Pink balloons filled with gold confetti and "60" printed on them run up the banister. Uncle smiles warmly. "Happy birthday!" Mother hugs him, bending him down into her small frame. The eldest follows quietly behind, recording the introductions, hugging along the way, keeping an eye on the phone screen to ensure that Mother stays within the frame. Father and the youngest bring luggage inside in waves. Uncle helps. "Good to see you guys didn't get swept away with the storm." "Yeah there was a lot of water on the road. Has it been like this long?" Mother poses briefly in front of large, gold inflated "6" and "0" balloons hanging on the wall with scotch tape before walking through gold fringe into the kitchen. The eldest stops recording and goes to help unload the car. Mother and

Grandmother hold each other tightly, rocking gently side to side. Grandmother's eyes are wet as she coos over the family in her home. The wind shakes the trees, sounding like cheerleader's pom-poms. Aunt pulls the eldest into the living room. "We need your help. Your mom says you're good at puzzles." A thousand pieces lay across a table. The table where they all used to eat years ago. Corn-on-the-cobb held at the ends by corn-shaped skewers, the eldest peeling each kernel off in a row until the corncob was clean. The puzzle is a third complete. The rest of the pieces are roughly organized by color. The eldest looks around, picks up a piece and connects it to a section of grass. "Yeah I can work on it."

Everyone trickles into the kitchen. Twelve bottles of wine – four Chardonnays, four Cabernets, two Sauvignon Blancs, one "red blend" and one Petit Syrah – line the island countertop. Father kisses the eldest on the forehead. "We'll get you something fun to drink." "Is anyone hungry?" Mother unpacks trays of pre-made quesadillas and quinoa salad, berries, yogurt, frozen scalloped potatoes, beef roast, bread. "You guys brought enough food to feed us for three days!" "I'm not really hungry. I actually want to walk into town and get a coffee." "Oh whoops. Booty bump! I'm just being silly." "So, what are you doing for work these days?" "Mom, do you have more room in the garage?" The youngest grabs her new coat. The eldest puts shoes back on. Cousin asks for an umbrella. The sky spits offensively as they walk to town. A few cars glide through puddles as if on a rollercoaster track. "Should we see what the waves are doing?" They go to the seawall. The horizon line blurs. Gray clouds melt into gray ocean foam. Wind whips their faces.

The sound of the thrashing saltwater makes their insides feel like they're in a rock tumbler. It is cold. "Let's go find coffee." They turn down a side street toward another cedar building. Two older women stand outside, arms folded around themselves, silently shivering. "They open?" "Well... the lights are on but the door is locked." "We figured someone has to be in there." The cousins look at each other. Tiny creeks stream down their faces from the flattened tips of their hair. "I saw a dog store a little ways back. I want to check that out." "Yeah, I want to grab some La Croix at the general store." "At least it's not too windy."

The women are talking in the kitchen when they all get back. Grandmother shuffles from her room to the island to the desk to the room and back out, laying small candles and bracelets and embroidered tea towels on the counter. "If you see anything you like, take it. I want to get rid of it." Mother and Aunt are looking through Mother's phone at pictures from a trip to the wine country. The men sit in the living room, checking emails to the sound of a Monday Night Football pregame show. The eldest and Cousin hunch over the puzzle. The youngest is searching in the cupboards for coffee filters.

"Grandma?" "In the drawer under the coffeemaker." Grandmother comes out of her room again. "I also have these crocheted hats one of the girls at the shop makes, if you need a hat." "Mom calls everyone 'girl' even though they're all the same age." "That is not true. I'm the second youngest one there." The gurgling coffeemaker echoes the plinking rain on the window. "Oh I was so hoping to have a sunny day for your stay. But it is winter on the Oregon coast." "Do you ever lose power in storms like this?" "Oh no. I'm just a block

away from the police station and the fire station and city hall, so the grid has to be stable in my neck of the woods.”

The lights go out. Silence.

The grey of outside crawls into the house. There is a fast-settling feeling of desperation. Fabric against fabric is the first sound anyone registers. Father puts down his laptop and goes into the kitchen. “How long do you think it’ll last?” A trance is broken and everyone moves into action. “I’ll go look for some matches. Mom, do you have any matches?” “What about batteries?” “I’ve got plenty of lanterns. I just need to remember where they all are...” “I think I saw two upstairs. I’ll go check.” “At least we have these candles.” Flashlights, standing camp lamps, batteries and matches are splayed across the island. The rations are divided. Scented candles go in the bathrooms. Two lanterns go on the table with the puzzle. One in Grandmother’s room, one in the family’s room and one in the relatives. A flashlight light for every one and a half people. Tealights in small glass jars fill in the gaps. Mother dances down the stairs. “Oh my goodness how fun! It’s just like the olden days!” “But how long do you think it’ll last?” Grandmother shoos the question away. “I’m sure they’ll have everything up and running in no time.”

For the first hour, most of the family dozes, remembering their bodies away from their phones, on whatever comfortable piece of furniture they find. Uncle on the reclining loveseat, Grandmother and Father on rocking chairs, Aunt in a bed upstairs, the youngest on a twin in a different room, which sits parallel to its replica, a similar set up to the room

the children had shared for the first nine years of their lives. It had been too much for the youngest when they got their own room – too much space, too much distance, too much solitude. She cried a lot during that time. It's early afternoon but the wet, dreary winter sky makes it feel later.

Sometime in the second hour, they begin to worry about dinner. Cousin goes to warm up some water in the microwave. "Oops. Forgot that's not on." "What are we going to do about the roast?" "I have some things in the freezer." "Shouldn't we *not* open the fridge?" "Eh." "Mom, we can't warm up freezer food." "No. I have some fish and some chicken breast I think." "The stove works?" "It should. It's gas." The family rallies again looking for acceptable birthday dinner foods. Father shakes off in the mudroom while holding a Styrofoam tray. "It is still really raining out there." He exhales hard like he has water up his nose. "Gross." "But I found some salmon. Maybe we can make the—" "That thing we made for the other pastors? That was so good." He sets the fish in the sink under running water. "Do you think we'll need more candles?" Uncle is putting on his coat. "I think I'm going to go into town, move around a bit."

This time they drive. "We might need to go up north a bit. I have a feeling everything is going to be closed." "Most everything was earlier." The three cousins sit in the back seat of the compact SUV. The radio sounds foreign after a few hours without music. They pull into the general store's parking lot. The eldest gets out to check the door. Closed. Everything feels emptier than before. Even the streetlights are off. They decide to drive twenty minutes to the next town. "Something to do. Let's see how far this blackout goes."

They drive past a campground. Only the tops of the picnic tables are visible. “Wow.”

Cars trudge forward through a pond forming in a valley in the road. A Mercedes SUV sits at a forty-five-degree angle on the side of the street, submerged up to its open windows.

“Open?” “Jesus it feels apocalyptic.” “Hey!” “Sorry.”

The lights in CVS are blinding. A long line zig-zags across the front before turning down an aisle of clearance Christmas candy. They all wander around aimlessly for a minute.

“What are we doing again?” The youngest opens a birthday card and then puts it back on the rack. “Killing time I guess. I’m gonna go look for some film.” “Yeah I’ll go see if they have candles or batteries. Just in case.” The shelves are sparse. “*Good-ness!* It looks like two years ago.” “Yeah... can you believe how different everything is now?” Uncle picks up the last twelve-count package of candles. “You think it’s a problem that they’re citronella?” Father shrugs. “Beggars can’t be choosers.”

A rotting smell greets them when they arrive back at the house. “Jesus, what is that smell?” “Hey!” “Sorry.” “It smells like a dead animal.” Mother pours a glass of wine and hands it to her sister. “Do you think something is in the vent?” Rats used to crawl into the walls in the house they had lived in when the children were younger. Sometimes they died in the summer and their decay would fill the air ducts and blow through the house when the AC was on. “Maybe. But why wouldn’t we smell it when the heat was on earlier?” “It’s not an animal.” Father pours a glass of wine. Uncle opens a Budweiser. The eldest takes a La Croix from the fridge. “How long has it been now?” “Seven years.” “Congratulations. That’s great.” “Is it too early to start making dinner? Is everyone

getting hungry?” “I don’t know what time it is – what is time now anyway – but I don’t think it’s too early.” Aunt sips her wine. The youngest takes a frosted glass from the freezer. “What’s that?” “Coconut brown ale. I don’t know. Sounded interesting.” “Can I taste?” Mother takes the glass. “Ew.” “And then after dinner we can do presents!” “And a game?” “I wish there was music.” “I have music.” The eldest pulls up Spotify. “How do you have service!?” The youngest grabs the phone. “I don’t. I downloaded stuff for the plane.” The eldest grabs it back. Miles Davis starts playing through a Bluetooth speaker.

The evening, dressed in a thick coat of clouds, sits heavily on the house. The smell of frying garlic and warm tomatoes starts to overpower the death scent. Mother sips wine and sways with the music. “Oh my goodness, I just love this!” She hugs the eldest. “This is the best birthday ever.” Grandmother pours a glass. “So what’s this you’re making here?” “Oh it’s just pan-seared salmon.” Father opens another bottle. “We made it for a pastor’s dinner recently.” “How is the church?” “Good good. A little frustrated with some of the way they’ve been handling things recently and I’m definitely ready to retire, but I’m not sure what I’m gonna do. But I have a couple years still.” “Oh you’re young. You’ll figure it out.”

Headlights illuminate the backwall of the kitchen. “Neighbors?” Uncle goes to the window. “Oh that’s a rental.” “Do you think they know we’re in a blackout?” Everyone watches as they struggle to unlock the front door. The code isn’t working. The troops rally again. “They’ll need candles!” “I bet they weren’t expecting this.” “They’re probably freezing. The heat’s been off for hours.” “Would it be bad to give them the

citronella ones?” Uncle, Grandmother and the youngest are putting on shoes. Cousin sits at the kitchen table. “Maybe we shouldn’t assume that the grown adults we don’t know aren’t helpless and can take care of themselves?” “I’ll just go see if they need anything real quick.” Uncle leaves. “Should we give them food? We have so much.” He comes back. “They said they could probably use a couple candles but that’s it.” “Well, what about food? Are they hungry? They can’t cook.” “Maybe they went out to eat.” Uncle cradles a few pillar candles in his arm. Grandmother puts on her coat. “I’m coming with you. I want to introduce myself and give them number in case they need anything else.” “But the phones don’t work.”

They take longer this time. When they come back, they inform everyone that the new arrivals did in fact eat out somewhere and don’t need any food. “Oh darn! I forgot to ask them if they need firewood! I’ll be right back.” Uncle dashes back into the dark, the wind slamming the door behind him. “Dinner is almost ready. Will someone set the table.” The rescue rations are moved to the island. Cousin and the youngest find placemats and lay them around the table. The door opens. “Okay. They didn’t answer this time so I just left it by their door.” Aunt is taking plates out of the cupboard. Mother opens another bottle. Father tries to hang a camping lantern from the chandelier over the kitchen table. “Dad. I got it.” The youngest runs upstairs. “The smell is *sooo* much worse up here!” Father gets the lamp to stay, forcing the disconnected light to sag toward the table. “Dad. *Stooooop*.” “What? It works.” The youngest leans over the banister, multiple small tealights in each hand. “No. It’s ugly.” “It doesn’t matter.” The youngest stomps down the remaining

steps. “Yes. It does matter if it’s ugly.” She rips the lamp down and arranges the candles. “That’s my daughter. I appreciate the dedication to ambiance.” “It matters if it’s ugly.”

Everyone fills a plate and sits. “Does anyone need more wine?” Mother places two bottles on the table. The family joins hands and bows their heads. Father prays. “Lord, we are truly truly blessed. Thank you for this very special time we have together. May you extend it ten-fold the way you extended your love for us through your Son. Bless our health and our safety tonight and through traveling tomorrow and be with those who have less than us and are not just in physical darkness tonight, but emotional darkness as well. We are so grateful for everything you’ve given us. In Jesus name. Amen.” Everyone echoes *amen*. “Happy birthday!” Glasses are raised and clinked in cheers. Forks scrape against plates. Laughter overtakes the music. “Stop! You’re going to make me pee my pants!” “But it’s true! He showed up with everything but his underwear!” “Honey, this salmon is delicious.” “What kind of wine is this?” The eldest gets another La Croix.

Dinner is finished and plates are cleared. Gifts are brought in and set next to cupcakes with gold and pink plastic “60” skewers in them. Mother and Father pose with mustache and top hat cut-outs taped to sticks. “Oh my goodness, that is so funny. You guys are so funny.” Aunt takes pictures in the flickering candlelight. “What should I open first?” “Whatever you want. It’s your birthday.” Mother reaches for a small box wrapped in metallic green striped paper. A blue leather purse from Aunt. Skin products from the youngest. “What are you trying to say?” A card with one hundred dollars in it from Grandmother. “You know what you like better than I do.” Nothing from Father. “I

already gave her my gift.” A handmade card that reads *FWOWUHS IS WUT BWINGS US TOGEVAH...* with a gift certificate to take a flower arranging class from the eldest. “I was just saying how I want to do flower arranging! Thank you! Thank you guys. This is so...” Mother’s eyes are wet. “This really is the best birthday ever.” Everyone looks at each other, yellow light dancing across their faces. Father rubs Mother’s back. She sniffs. Aunt claps her hands like she’s talking to kindergarteners. “Should we play a game!?” “I know the perfect game.” The youngest jumps up, moving into the kitchen. “Fishbowl! Grandma, do you have a bowl?”

Father opens another bottle of wine. “Anyone need a top off?” The women refill their glasses. Everyone finds a seat in the living room. The youngest tears paper into strips. “Okay the way this works is, you’re trying to get your team to say the word on the paper. Each word is a point and your team has thirty seconds to guess. There are three rounds. The first round is taboo, so you can say anything *but* the word. The second round you can only say *one* word for your team to try and guess. The last round you have to act it out *silently*. Got it?” “So we have to write new words each round?” Mother and Aunt bring in more candles. The room looks like a *séance*. Light flickers across black and white photos on the mantle. Grandmother and Grandfather’s wedding, Aunt and Mother ice skating as children, Great-grandmother in a backyard with a dog. The youngest stands. “No. You use the same words.” “Well won’t that be too easy by the end?” Father sips his wine. The eldest and Cousin are still trying to work on the puzzle. “What are the words supposed to be?” “I think the words should be anything that has to do with mom. Like something

about her specifically or the year she was born or just something that reminds you of her.” Everyone grabs paper and writes. “Should we turn on the fire!?” “But we’ll burn our butts off!” Mother squeals with laughter. She laughs so hard, it turns silent and she leans into her sister, inhaling sharply. “Oh, there she goes.” Father points to his wife, laughing along with her. It’s infectious. The decibel of the room elevates, with quick puffs of air and coughs as they try to catch their breath. The eldest gets up. “I need another La Criox.” Cousin snaps another piece in place. “Can you get me one too?”

The game doesn’t last long. Every word brings up a memory – falafels at the beach in summer, Mother’s braces going through her top lip in a fender bender, Grandmother and Grandfather leaving their kids in the car when they would go out. “Sometimes we would have to knock on the bar door to use the bathroom.” “Oh pff, it was a different time then.” Grandmother shoos the comment away and sips her wine. “Come look at the stars with me.” The youngest pulls the eldest toward the door. “Okay, let me get my shoes.” “It’ll only be a minute. Just come outside.” “What about your coat?” “We need to live!” And they are out the door.

It is cold and the air is damp. Wind sighs through the trees. Residual rain drips from the roof’s overhang. Faint blue light comes through kitchen window, eerily outlining the trees in the shallow yard. Everything else in every direction is dark. “You *literally* can’t see anything.” The youngest stands with her arms raised to the sky. “But *look* at these stars!” She sips her wine. “Where’s Orion?” The eldest looks to the sky. “Right above us.” The youngest steps back onto the porch, looking intently at the eldest. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” The eldest looks up. The youngest exhales in a whimper. “I keep saying “she” and I’m just... you know... I’m sorry.” The eldest looks down, ashamed. “It’s fine. I told you, I haven’t talked to anyone and you know mom and dad would... it’s fine. Really.” They look at each other for a moment. The youngest goes back into the street. “This is incredible! There are so many stars! You should take a picture of the stars.” “I’m trying.” The youngest twirls while staring straight up. “Do you know any other constellations?” “Cassiopeia but I don’t see it.” “Is this the step?” The eldest looks where the youngest is looking. “That’s the planter. Careful! Jesus—” The youngest falls into the soggy, mossy ground, spilling red wine down her white sweats. She laughs, rolling over. “Oh nooooooo! Don’t take a picture of this.” The eldest take two. “We should really get some water on those pants.”

Most of the family stands around the kitchen island when they come back in. Mother sets her wine glass down a little too hard. “Oh sorry. I’m just saying that—what?” Father starts rubbing her back. “Nevermind. That’s the sign. I’m being too much.” He rolls his eyes and goes into the darkened living room. Aunt comes out of the bathroom. “It is so weird peeing by candlelight. Oh no what happened to your pants?” “She fell.” “I fell.” Grandmother shuffles over and grabs the pant leg, stretching it. “Well, off with them then.” “It’ll be fine.” The youngest sips what’s left of her wine. “Okay actually maybe I should take them off. Do you still have those other ones?” The eldest points upstairs. “Yeah they’re in the wagon at the foot of the bed near Raggedy Ann.” The youngest goes upstairs. “That smell is disgusting!” “Yeah, it seems like it’s getting worse. Have we

checked all our shoes?” Mother leans into the eldest shoulder, hiding her face in a secret. “It’s because of the dog.” The eldest leans down. “What dog? Grandma doesn’t have a dog.” “No. I’m not supposed to say anything, but back when your cousin was dating that one girl, she brought her dog over and it peed upstairs on this rug and no one knew about it and it soaked into the wood. It still makes him upset and it really hurt his feelings we kept talking about it so don’t say anything.” Mother breathes heavily and wraps her arms around the eldest, squeezing tightly. “You are my sweet girl. I just love you so much...” The eldest pats Mother’s hair and kisses her forehead. “I know.” The youngest comes back down with purple splotted sweats in hand. “I didn’t realize people were starting to go to sleep. We should probably be quieter.” She and Grandmother go to the laundry room to put some Spray-N-Wash on the pants. “That will at least keep it from setting until the power comes back.” Aunt dances around the island. “I want to hear that song. *This is how we doooo iiiiit*. Who sings that?” “I can’t remember but I don’t have that one downloaded—” “I want to hear the Backstreet Boys. *This is hooow we do iiiiiiit*.” “That’s not the Backstreet Boys.” “I dunno... I’m pretty sure it’s the Backstreet Boys.” “It’s not.” Father comes back into the kitchen, interested but unamused. He pours wine into his glass. “It’s one hundred percent *not* the Backstreet Boys.” “N’sync?” Mother laughs. “Yes! I love N’sync!” The eldest leans against the countertop, yawning, exhausted and annoyed. “Well, I think I’ve had about enough for tonight. It’s off to bed for me.” Grandmother shuffles to her room with a too-da-loo. Aunt goes to the banister. “We should probably start taking all these balloons off.” She starts to peel the first one from its tape and

BANG! pink latex explodes like a gunshot. Large, gold confetti flutters in slow motion to the floor. “Jesus!” “Hey!” “Sorry!” The eldest paces quickly between the kitchen and living room, like a trapped animal. Mother and Aunt scoop balloon shrapnel into a small pile, giggling like children. The eldest goes up the stairs, closes the door, gets under the lighthouse patterned comforter on the twin bed and begins to cry uncontrollably. Father rubs his wife’s shoulder. “You should probably go check on your daughter.” “But we’re cleaning up the balloons.” Mother sways. “Here let’s take them outside to pop so we don’t get glitter everywhere.” Aunt walks out to the porch, holding four balloons at their ties. Mother follows. Father goes up the stairs.

He pushes the door just as the eldest pulls it open. Blue lantern light cast shadows at strange angles. “How are you doing sweetie pie?” “I’m fine.” The eldest’s eyes are puffy with tears. “No you’re not. What’s going on?” They stare at each other in a game of mental chicken. “You’re right! I’m not okay! I’m fucking angry! Everyone is drunk and there’s no power and I miss *my* home and I just want to leave but I can’t because I’m stuck! Here! With *all* of you! I can’t *go anywhere!*” Father holds the eldest to his chest in a big bear hug. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize I was drunk.” The eldest pushes away. “I think I just need a break from everyone.” Father pulls the eldest back into a hug. “I get that. I’ll make sure you get some time up here alone, okay?” He looks at the eldest for understanding. “No I—okay...” Father leaves and the eldest looks helplessly at the door before flailing back on the bed. A knock. Aunt comes in. “Hey, just wanted to come check on you. I’m so sorry about the balloon. I didn’t mean to upset you.” The eldest sits

up. “Oh I know. It was an accident. It’s fine.” “Okay good. I just... it really seemed to scare you so I just wanted to make sure everything was okay. Okay, well, goodnight.” Aunt leaves just as Mother and the youngest come in. “Mom. You’re drunk and you need to go bed.” Mother flops on the bed, exasperated. “Huuuh, did I do something wrong?” “Mom. *You’re* drunk and you need to go to *bed*.” Mother stands back up. “Okay I get it but I jus—I don’t understand what I did..” The youngest looks to the eldest. “She’s drunk and she needs to go to bed.” “Uh-huh.” “*Okay*... just let me get my pajamas on.” The youngest leaves. Mother looks to the eldest. “Can you tell me what I did?” The eldest shrugs and turns back to the pillow.

And then sits back up. It’s been silent for too long. Mother is gone. The eldest goes to the top of the stairs listening as the rest of the family aggressive whispers in the living room. Father slams his wine glass down on the side table. “EVERYBODY! FAMILY MEETING! RIGHT NOW!” “Dad, I’m just say—unhh fine. But your anger doesn’t help.” The youngest smashes into one side of the loveseat while Mother slumps in the other. The eldest takes a chair from the puzzle table. Father rocks impatiently in the recliner. “What were you *saying* daughter?” “You know what, no. Your anger doesn’t help.” “My anger?” “Your anger *doesn’t* help?” “I don’t—” The youngest claps her hands in emphasis with each word. “Your *anger* doesn’t help! I’m not doing this tonight. I’m done. I’m going to bed.” The youngest leaves. Mother guffaws. Father looks at the eldest. “My anger?” He points his hand upstairs. “Dad. You know this is not the time to be doing this.” “But how am I the angry one when I’m getting yelled at?” The eldest

looks at him skeptically. “You know no one is coming to the table with just the information from that given moment. We’re all coming into this with a whole history of shit.” There is a beep and the lights come back on. Mother sits up and claps her hands. “Oh my goodness a birthday miracle!”

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The morning is half bathed in sunlight. The sound of coffee brewing mixes with newscasters joking about the weather. The laundry dryer dings. Grandmother shakes out the sweatpants. “Well, I think that’s as good as it’s gonna get.” “Oh well.” The family loads the rental car, hugging and kissing and promising to do this again soon. They are quiet on the drive. Mother directs Father to a gas station near the airport. They all watch as an attendant pumps their gas. “It’s so weird.” Everyone goes to the airline’s ticketing desk to check their bags. They won’t take the eldest’s. “So unfortunately, we can’t take the bag until four hours before the flight. That way we can ensure it gets on the proper plane.” The eldest steps away, distressed. “It’ll be okay. I can wait a few hours out here.” “No honey. Give me your liquids and I’ll send them to you. Then you can go through security with us.” The eldest gives Mother a plastic bag of shampoo, conditioner and face wash. “I don’t need it back honestly.” They go through security and get coffee and pastries at a kiosk. They talk about buying new luggage, work they need to do back home, the next visit. “I’m really wanting to make it out to you in February.” They go to the gate where Mother, Father and the youngest will fly out. Mother goes to the bathroom. Father walks around. The eldest watches people line up in different waves to leave. The youngest Instagrams. They all walk together when their section is called.

Mother wraps her arms around the eldest. “I love you so much. I’m glad we got this time together.” “Me too.” Father spreads his arms wide before drawing the eldest in a hug. “I love you this much and I love you this much.” “I love you too dad.” The youngest and the eldest hug each other around their backpacks. “I love you sea star.” “I love you sea star.” The three walk toward the jetway, waving until they turn the corner, out of sight. The eldest walks to a different gate while quiet rivers flow from each eye.

after

The hole appeared overnight in late April at the intersection of Jackson and Cherry. It was the size of an above-ground swimming pool, which didn't seem to bother people too much, until it grew to swallow the maroon Buick LaSabre with the flat tire that had been parked on the corner for the past five months. Then the neighbors began to worry. The end times, they whispered. A gate to hell. Soap box preachers from the local Baptist church showed up with weathered vinyl banners hanging from PVC crosses. Repent, they said. Turn to the Lord! He is the way, the truth and the light! So some prayed. Some interrogated each other. Some drew the blinds in their windows. The kids joked that it was a portal to the Upside Down, walking right to the edge of the chasm, their outstretched hands shivering with tension, wiping invisible blood from their noses. As if that was all it took. The Bryants left when the hole crawled across their front lawn and ate the left corner of their porch, the deck sagging into the void, teetering like painful words. There was no use trying to sell the house. They just drove the family van into the backyard, loaded it up and drove away. The geologists came last in lab coats with lab goggles and lab clipboards to take lab tests. A natural phenomena, they said. Once in a lifetime, they said. I watched as they swung mechanical arms into the pit to scrape at its sides as if the opening was some claw machine they were trying to pull a purple teddy bear from. They were scooping red dirt into little plastic baggies when I hung up the phone with your doctor.

the second time

Malory sits on the couch my ex refuses to claim because she's "not in a stable enough place yet." I chop green beans in the kitchen while garlic heats in a pan. We're waiting for Becca to arrive. I initially used a cake I made for Ben's birthday as an excuse to invite Becca over. But when Malory heard, she invited herself too and it has turned into an impromptu friend's dinner. "She's here. Want me to go let her in?" I catch my breath, nervously wiping my hands on a dish towel. "No I got it." I bounce down the stairs as Becca hops up the porch steps. "This place is amazing! You should buy it." "Yeah it's a pretty nice spot." I watch Becca climb up to my apartment. The smell of hot oil and herbs spill into the hallway. "It's the second one." Becca waits for me to open the door. "It smells amazing in here." "Yeah we decided to make dinner first. You hungry?" She looks down at her feet and then at me. "I'm always hungry." Malory stands, opening a Diet Coke. "Look who actually came out! I'm so proud of you." She pats Becca on the back. I'm glad Malory is here. As much as I would like to be alone with Becca, I haven't dated in seven years and I'm not sure how to go about any of that.

The two of them stand in the kitchen door frame. I shake the pan and put the beans in. "Becca can I get you something to drink?" "Water if you've got it." I open the fridge. "I have bubble water or filtered water over there." I point to a small stainless-steel tank sitting on a table against the kitchen's back wall. My ex insisted I buy one before she would take the other with her in the move. I rarely remember it and drink from the tap.

“I’m good with tap water if I can just have a glass.” She takes one from the drying rack next to sink before I can hand her one from the cupboard. “So what’s for dinner?” Malory looks over the pans on the stove. “Pork chops, sauteed green beans, roasted potatoes and spinach salad with goat cheese, fresh figs and pecans.” “Can I do mine without pecans? I can’t do nuts cause I got bad teeth.” Malory bares her teeth like a vampire. “Of course dude. Becca is there anything you can’t eat?” My ex ate very specific foods in very specific quantities. I began cooking elaborate, multi-coursed meals after she left. “No. I eat everything.” I shake a pan back and forth, trying to be nonchalantly impressive as green beans turn over themselves like a wave. “That’s wifey material right there.” Malory looks at Becca while pointing at me and sipping her Diet Coke. She walks back to the couch. “Should we do something after?” Becca half follows, leaning against the back of a new couch that sits parallel to my ex’s. “Like what?” “We could go swimming.” I bend back to look at them while mixing salad dressing. “Swimming where?” “We can go to my old apartment complex. They haven’t changed the gate code and nobody there cares.” She pulls her shirt away from her stomach. “I mean, if it’s not too late cause I know you gotta bedtime.” Becca moves back to the door frame. “I do have a bedtime but if it’s not too late, I could go swimming.” I turn the potatoes. Three thuds break overhead like a baseball stumbling down stairs. Becca looks at me. “Is everything okay?” *Shit*. “Yeah that wasn’t me.” I put the potatoes back in the oven. “So... my neighbor fell last year and we didn’t know it for three days so I’m just gonna run up there real quick and make sure everything’s okay.” And before they can say anything, I am out the door.

I slowly push Lew's door open in case he's fallen in front of it. "Lew?" His voice squeaks from the back room. "Help." I walk past the western kitsch and Cher's altar. He is on his back, his skeletal body splayed across the floor. His head at an awkward angle, pushed up by the crossbar of a chair. His robe pools around him. He is not wearing any underwear. He squints in the dim light. "Who's that?" "It's Lauren from downstairs." He coughs. "Oh Lauren. Oh I don't know what happened but I've fallen and I can't get up." I think of all the Life Alert commercials that aired during breaks in daytime television with that cotton haired lady lying on her side so close to her walker. The table light is also on its side. I set it upright on the side table and kneel next to him. "You think you can walk?" "Oh yes. I just can't seem to get my legs under me." Cigarette burns mark the beige carpet. Receipts, take out menus and manilla envelopes spew out of a magazine rack that holds an office-style telephone. A pill organizer sits next to it. Sunday afternoon, Monday morning, Monday night, Tuesday night and Wednesday morning are the only compartments missing pills. Chunky broken glass haloes his right shoulder. Miniature figurines, seashells, sea glass and pennies are scattered across the table and floor. I start to pick up the glass. "Well, I'm going to get this glass up and then we'll get your feet under you." I set the small pile of shards on the corner of the table and pull his walker in front of me. "Okay Lewis here's what we're gonna do – you're going to put your arms around my neck and I'm going to put my arms around your back and we're going to stand up together. You think you can do that?" "Yes yes. I just need to get me feet under me, that's all." I lean over him like we are lovers, bracing myself with my right hand while I pull him into a seated position, then move into a squat in front of him.

“Ready?” “Ready.” I stand. He is heavy as a child. “Okay keep holding onto my neck...” And then we are facing each other in an awkward waltz. We take a shaky step. I slide his walker between us with one hand, keeping one arm wrapped around his thin waist. “Keep holding on.” “I am.” “Okay now grab the handles here. I’ve got you.” He reaches down like a boy riding a bicycle without training wheels for the first time. “You got it? I’m going to let go.” “I’ve got it—” And he is crumbling back to the floor. “Why can’t I do it?” “It’s okay Lewis, we can try again but—” I grab a couple pillows from the bed and prop him up. “I have dinner on the stove and I really need to go check the food.” “Oh of course.” “But I’ll come back.” I stand. “Well, I’m not going anywhere.” He spits out a labored laugh.

“Is everything okay? We turned down the heat for you.” They’re both sitting on my ex’s couch. Becca leans forward like she’s about to get up. “Yeah I just need to call his caretaker real quick. But dinner will be ready soon.” I turn to hide the water that is starting to swell in my eyes and strain to steady my voice on the phone. I turn on the heat under and empty skillet, watching bacon fat liquify. I lay the chops in the pan, the grease popping and sizzling. The meat cooks in the six minutes it takes to fill in Lew’s caretaker. I hang up, get the pork onto a plate and go into the living room. “Okay so I sorta left him precariously perched on some pillows. I’m just gonna run back up and get him into bed. But the food is all done so please help yourself.” My brain short circuits, leaving me standing and staring. “Mhmm okay.” They nod in agreement with me and I am back up the stairs.

Lewis has slid down the pillows like a baby in a high chair. I forgot to turn the TV off before and some news program is telling us about the latest wildfire in California. *30,000 acres burned already. The power company claims they took all the necessary precautions. But residents tell a different sto—* Lewis puffs like he’s blowing out candles. “Turn this crap off.” “Where’s the remote?” His bony hand swats next to his ear. I check the armrest organizer hanging on the side of the chair, pulling out slips of paper and small spiral notepads and unopened mail. I look under the chair, empty boxes of Marlboro gold 100’s pile in the corner. I lift papers off the phone table. I am on my hands and knees, pressing my ear to the floor, looking at carpet fibers, smelling years of shuffling feet and dropped cigarettes and spilled food. Every life choice I have ever made has led to this moment. The remote is sandwiched between the base of the table and the wall. I press power and the screen goes black. “Okay we’re going to try the same thing, but this time I’m going to keep holding on to you and we’re going to walk to the bed together. Sound good?” he looks at me determined. “Yes.” “You think you can do that?” He nods. “Yes.” I kneel down again and we take our positions – his arms around my neck, mine around his lower back. I lean back on my left foot and lift and we are dancers starting at one. “Ready?” “Yes.” He looks at his feet. “Step forward...” We shuffle slightly. “Step for—” And he slips through my arms. “It’s okay. I think I’m just tired. I’ll just sleep here tonight. I’m fine.” I sit down next to him. “Lewis I’m sorry. I just—” I reach for the pillows behind me. “Janet is on her way, okay? And I’ll come back up when she gets here.” I wrap his robe back over him like I’m tucking him into bed. His tissue paper voice whines. “I’m fine. I’m fine.”

I push my thumbs into the space where my eyes, brows and nose meet and breathe deeply. Sharp pain wraps around my forehead and temples and over my ears like sunglasses. Malory and Becca look at me like they are family sitting in an emergency waiting room. Becca stands. “We wanted to wait for you.” “Well, y’all hungry.” I plate pork chops and green beans, take the potatoes out of the oven and dress the salad. Malory peeks over my shoulder. “Remember no nuts.” We take our plates back to the living room. “I’m sorry I don’t have a real table.” “This is perfect.” Becca sits down. “Shit.” I run back into the kitchen and grab the bowl of applesauce that’s been cooling.

“Applesauce?” Becca looks confused. “Yeah dude. Haven’t you heard of pork chops and applesauce?” Malory takes it from me and scoops some onto her plate. “What? No. I’ve never heard of the before.” Becca takes the bowl, looking into it like it’s a crystal ball she doesn’t believe. “Is that like a California thing? Are you guys trying to trick me into something?” Malory and I laugh. “A California thing? It’s definitely not a California thing.” She puts a spoonful tentatively on the side of her plate. “It definitely sounds like a California thing. But I’ll try it.” I look at her. “I don’t know. It’s just the way my family has always had pork.” She cuts into it and takes a bite. “Okay okay yeah. Pork chops and applesauce. That’s a *good* California thing.” I shake my head. Malory rolls her eyes. My phone lights up. “Lew’s caretaker is here. I’ll be right back.”

Humid air follows Janet into the hallway. She carries her years loosely in her arms and lower back. She looks like Santa Claus’ wife. “How is he?” “Last I checked, fine but he can’t really walk or hold himself up.” Lewis has slipped down again, his robe bunching

around his neck. “Hey Lewis. It’s Janet.” “Janet?” She looks back at me. We’re probably both going to need to lift him to bed.” She doesn’t wait for me to respond. “Lewis, we’re going to pick you up and get you on the bed and then I’m going to take your vitals.” He shoos her. “Pfft.” She bends over him, looking him up and down and then to me. “I’m going to pick him up by the shoulders, if you can wrap your arms around his legs. That should be enough to get him to bed.” She kneels down at his head and fits her forearms under his armpits. “Ready?” I wrap his thighs into my torso and she one, two, threes and we lift him like a plank and shuffle forward. “Careful.” To the left. “Watch that plant.” Hover over the bed. “And down.” “But my head goes on the other side.” I pick the pillows up off the floor and hand them to her. “Well maybe tonight we sleep this way.” She talks to him like his is hard of hearing. “Lewis, when was the last time you went to the bathroom?” “Oh I don’t know.” He’s annoyed. She props his head up. “Thank you for all your help tonight. I’m sure you had better things to do.” “I—it’s fine. I’m glad someone heard him.” I watch Lewis as she puts a pillow under his knees. “Is there anything else you need from me?” She’s checking his pulse. “No thank you. You’re a good neighbor.” I rub a cigarette burn with my toe. “I mean, okay.”

I fall onto my ex’s couch with a heavy sigh. My plate remains on the coffee table. Malory and Becca have cleared theirs. Becca is doing dishes. “How’re you doing dude?” Malory pats my knee. I open my mouth and then close it, afraid corn kernels of loneliness and sadness will start spilling out. I blink the water from my eyes but it doesn’t work. “Y’all still wanna go swimming?” The kitchen faucet turns off and plates clink together. Becca

walks out of the kitchen, drying her hands with a dish towel. “Let’s go break into a pool.”

05/17/2021

How am I supposed to feel when you say we lived in sin
for the last seven years? Tell me it is a sin

to turn my jaw into a fist. How I tried to wring hope
from a soiled rag, learned to kiss the head of sin

like a child afraid of the dark. How am I to feel
watching your tears mark my floor for the sins

of those you claim won't enter the kingdom.

Tell me to love the sinner and hate the sin.

How can I love the water and hate its wet?

I was bathed in the Father – a picture of my salt-sin

baptism hangs just above the air vent – nose-pinched,

holding my breath – a baby blanket to prevent whatever's in

that water from flowing. Tell me how I am to cup your unholy

offering so I can tell you how the day you left, so did my sin.

statement of purpose

Because this makes me feel dumb. Because despite my attempts to love other things, this is the thing I love more than anything else. Because I don't know what else to do.

Because I'm running out of options. Because I'm getting older. Because this is a necessity that I keep putting off. Because I don't want to live in a tiny apartment forever.

Because I have so much to say. Because every line I think is great is the first that needs to be cut. Because I'm starting to think it might be easier to rob a bank than write

something. Because I want to start a family. Because I need health insurance. Because I can't keep working a job where all I do every-goddamn-day is cut out paper and put

glitter on it. Because the stories are eating at my insides. Because I want to be consumed.

Because I want to leave something behind. Because I don't know how to say any of it.

Because I'm afraid of being forgotten. Because I do want to be consumed. Because

someone told me I was good at this. Because I'm different. Because I'm just like

everyone else. Because I'm a phony. Because I love everything I read in high school and

college (except Nathaniel Hawthorne). Because I like school. Because I need the

discipline. Because I want to be good. Because I want to be really good. Because I'm

afraid of good things and honestly I don't know how to take care of myself. Because I

didn't walk at my graduation and I want a second chance. Because once, I wrote a poem that someone said sounded like something else and I felt a part of that something.

Because once, I wrote a story that a teacher asked if I wanted to publish it and I walked

away. Because once, I gave a friend a collection of things I wrote and she said she cried

reading them. Because once. Because why not? Because I come from a family of touring ice skaters and we do it for the applause. Because I don't know what the fuck else to do with my life. Because I'm lazy. Because I can't just keep crying about shit. Because I've been sober nine years and think the creativity is gone. Because I tell myself I'm a victim so I guess this is it. Because I tell myself I'm great and dammit, I'm better than this. Because what I have to say is important. Because I have a big ego. Because I don't think I'm worth much of anything. Because I need someone else to justify my existence. Because I want to make my father proud. Because I want to make myself proud. Because when I was a kid, I wanted to change the world. Because I don't feel grown up yet. Because it feels melodramatic. Because I'm terrible with second drafts. Because there are so many words and yet none of them seem appropriate or accurate and yet I still believe in trying. Because trying is all I can do. Because the cynicism is starting to chip away at me. Because I'm a forever optimist. Because I have nothing to lose. Because I am a walking, breathing cliché. Because I'm not sure I know who I am otherwise.

vita

Sara Perkins was born on July 10th, 1986, in Simi Valley, California. They lived a pretty above average American childhood, though they didn't know that at the time. In high school, they got a write up in the local paper for scoring some goals in a water polo game. They attended the University of California in Irvine for a couple years, but it didn't work out. It was them, not the school. Then they bounced around a couple community colleges in California, trying to figure out what they wanted to do in life, before attending a discipleship school in Olathe, Kansas. They figured they would try to be a good Christian. Turns out they're queer. Sara finally got around to finishing their undergrad education at the Kansas City Art Institute, receiving a BFA in Filmmaking and Creative Writing in 2013.

Seven years later, they began working toward their MFA at the University of Missouri in Kansas City. There they served as a poetry editor for the school undergrad lit mag, *Number One*. They have yet to be published.