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Critical Introduction

Honors Thesis

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Time, Prolepsis, & Narrative Voice in The Construction of Linked Short Fiction: An Examination of Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad*

In her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan presents a unique reading experience for her audience: a novel in the form of 13 linked short stories, all of which culminate into a detailed and eventually cohesive narrative that transcends the traditional novel form. Although the connections between her short stories are not immediately apparent, they become more and more obvious as the novel progresses. Because of her innovative use of voice, her manipulation of time, and her repeated and poignant use of prolepsis to create emotion, Egan is able to present 13 stand-alone stories, all of which come together to produce a novel that is both true to the human experience of emotion, and revolutionary in its narrative form. Egan's novel has been influential in my own writing, and it is with her techniques in mind that I began striving to create my own works of fiction in a more formationally transcendent and emotionally impactful manner.

Egan's use of prolepsis is one of the most pervasive and effective aspects of her novel, and is what first allowed me to notice the connection between Egan's writing and my own.

While it is prominent throughout the book, it is perhaps most influential in the chapter titled

Safari, in which we see some of the novel's more obscure characters emerge as important players in the larger scheme of the narrative. The chapter *Safari* focuses on a record producer featured in the previous chapter, Lou Kline, and two of his children, Charlie and Rolph, as they vacation in Africa with Lou's girlfriend, two older women, and some of Lou's business associates. While the chapter is integral in revealing more about Lou's character, it also works to connect past, present, and future through the use of prolepsis.

The most striking example Egan presents is the revelation that Lou's son Rolph will die by suicide in the future, juxtaposed against a poignant and endearing scene from his youth. Rolph and his sister Charlie are dancing, and begin to feel themselves, "growing up right there on the dance floor" (82). Egan writes, "Charlie feels it too. In fact, this particular memory is one she'll return to again and again, for the rest of her life, long after Rolph has shot himself in the head in their father's house at twenty-eight; her brother as a boy, hair slicked flat, eyes sparkling, shyly learning to dance" (82). Throughout the chapter, we see Rolph's interactions with his father and sister as a child, and Egan immediately presents him as a figure of youthful innocence, a stark contrast to his sister, who is older and is often annoyed by his childish antics. She is still reeling from the divorce of their parents, causing her to be angry much of the time (61). It is because we see Rolph as an innocent child that the revelation of his suicide at the end of the chapter is so powerful, and Egan's carefully placed use of prolepsis allows us to see into a future that is made infinitely more tragic because we have known Rolph deeply in his youth. Egan takes her use of prolepsis even further, allowing us a glimpse into the life of Charlie, Rolph's sister, and we are presented with a future version of her, who goes by Charlene, and has a son she calls

Rolph only to herself because her parents are still so heartbroken by his death that she cannot name him after her brother (83).

In addition to giving us information about Rolph's death and his sister's future life, Egan employs prolepsis to tell the story of a young warrior that Charlie interacts with, and is, through his small narrative arc, able to connect the chapter *Safari*, which takes place relatively early in the novel, to the final chapter, *Pure Language*. Charlie makes eye contact with one warrior in a group of them one night, and approaches them as they sing, swaying back and forth in front of them (61). It is during this scene that we get a glimpse into both the future of the warrior and the future of characters to come later in the novel. Egan writes,

“Thirty-five years from now, in 2008, this warrior will be caught in the tribal violence between the Kikuyu and the Luo and will die in a fire. He'll have had four wives and sixty-three grandchildren by then, one of whom, a boy named Joe, will inherit his *lalema*: the iron hunting dagger in a leather scabbard now hanging at his side. Joe will go to college at Columbia and study engineering, becoming an expert in visual robotic technology that detects the slightest hint of irregular movement (the legacy of a childhood spent scanning the grass for lions). He'll marry an American named Lulu and remain in New York, where he'll invent a scanning device that becomes standard issue for crowd security. He and Lulu will buy a loft in Tribeca, where his grandfather's hunting dagger will be displayed inside a cube of Plexiglas, directly under a skylight” (61).

Although the reader is not aware of it until much later, Egan has already begun to craft the culmination of her novel, in which characters from throughout the scattered, individual stories will converge in what was once just an imagined future. Although we do not meet the warrior's grandson, Joe, directly, his wife Lulu is an important character in the final chapter, representing the exceedingly technological future, in which communication has changed drastically and human connections seem more disconnected than before. The prolepsis Egan employs in order to tell us about the warrior serves the purpose of creating a more emotional scene between Charlie and the warrior in the chapter's present-tense perspective. It serves a larger purpose in the grand scheme of the novel, working toward Egan's overall goal, which is to connect stories that span across time, demonstrating her ability to form a cohesive narrative in a format that initially appeared separate and disjointed.

The use of prolepsis to heighten emotion is something I have explored often in my own writing to reveal the death of both minor and more prominent characters. In addition to its ability to heighten tension in scenes, it also serves to provide resolutions to stories that otherwise might not be wrapped up, which is especially important in the context of Egan's novel, which often introduces characters for only a number of pages at a time; without prolepsis, the reader would be left to wonder about their fate, and likely continue to the next segment of the story unsatisfied. Part of the work prolepsis does is to further the reader's knowledge about each character, even though it often occurs in only one or two sentences. In his article *Many Years Later: Prolepsis in Deep Time*, Bruce Robbins suggests this very idea, writing,

“The ending of a novel is sometimes thought to distribute fates, thereby painting the composite portrait of a community and the state of justice, such as it is, within that community. Prolepsis does some of the same work, but it impatiently refuses to wait for the ending, as if knowing in advance that from the viewpoint of genuine justice the ending will inevitably disappoint” (199).

Robbins’s perspective on prolepsis is important in understanding an entirely new layer of its function. In the scene with the warrior, we are drawn into the future by his grandson Joe and his wife Lulu, and in turn we find out the fate of the warrior, who has a significant impact on Charlie but otherwise appears to be an unimportant character. While giving us insight into the future, Egan also provides resolution to a minor character’s story, demonstrating the multi-dimensional uses of flash forwards in the context of both stories contained within a single chapter, and stories that transcend the boundaries of the narrative. In his book *About Time*, Mark Currie takes a similar perspective, writing, “to look back on an event is to give it a significance it did not possess at the time of its occurrence...By making an excursion into a future which is already in place, fiction can therefore instruct us in the kinds of significance acquired by an event when it is looked back upon in a mode of teleological retrospect” (33). It is important to realize that while prolepsis is often a way of wrapping up an otherwise unresolved narrative arc, it can also serve as a tool for the reader in understanding which events are significant. In Egan’s case, it gives the reader clues into the significance of both present and future events, connecting them in otherwise undetectable ways. The scene between Charlie and the warrior is seemingly unimportant as a stand-alone event, but because Egan allows us to glimpse into the future, we

come to understand that the warrior's story threads into the entire novel rather than a single chapter. It is only later that we see the full connection, but the slow-reveal makes Egan's use of flash forwards early on in the story even more effective and astonishing, and is clearly a well-thought out and carefully employed narrative technique.

In the context of my own writing, I have often employed flash forwards to create tension, but it was not until reading Egan's novel that I understood the wide range of roles prolepsis can take on, and the multi-dimensional ways it can improve and expand on an existing narrative arc. Because I was already dealing with the death of a central character in my writing, I began exploring more with the use of prolepsis in connecting stories that otherwise seemed unrelated, and it became a very helpful tool in connecting the stories from my own collection, while also providing insight into characters that otherwise would not have been further explained. One such example from my collection of short stories is the two page vignette, *Loss*, which is somewhat disconnected on its own, but plays an important role in providing background to one of my longer works, *The Undertaker for Dreamers*, which appears earlier in the collection. In *the Undertaker for Dreamers*, the narrator, Ivy, is fascinated by both the death of a young girl in her town, Sofia, and the death of her mother's best friend, which occurred decades earlier. Although we do not learn anything more about the mother or her friend in Ivy's story, I employed prolepsis in order to flash forward to an event that occurs in *The Undertaker for Dreamers*, providing a more tangible thread between the two stories, rather than having them connected more loosely by the concept of loss. In *Loss*, I wrote,

“ Your daughter will not ask you about her for many years, but one day she will send you a message out of nowhere, asking for her name. You will be too afraid to tell her it belongs to her. Too afraid to tell her you have created her around the fading memory of your lost heart. It will not be until you have almost disappeared from her reach that you will pull her into your chest, into your shallow heartbeat and whisper to her the secrets of your lost and broken youth” (23).

Although this quote is somewhat unimportant in the context of *Loss* itself, it employs the same function as the warrior scene in Egan’s *Safari*, because it connects it to *The Undertaker for Dreamers*, and also gives the reader additional information about the future of Ivy and her mother. Although we do not ever see Ivy’s mother on her deathbed or see Ivy learn about her mother’s friend, who she was so deeply fascinated by, prolepsis does allow a flash forward that provides information about this conversation, thereby including the reader in the distant future that would otherwise be unwritten and invisible.

In addition to her repeated and effective use of prolepsis, Egan often employs unique narrative formats, switching between first, second, and third person depending on her intended tone for each chapter. One chapter that is particularly fascinating is titled, “Out of Body,” and is written in second person “you” voice; the chapter follows Rob, a depressed character who drowns at the end of the chapter, and is brought up later by one of the main characters’ [Sasha’s] daughter. The chapter is intimately connected to the chapter titled “Great Rock and Roll Pauses,” which is narrated by Sasha’s daughter, Allison, and will be discussed later in further detail. “Out of Body,” however, is important to discuss because it employs second person, which provides a

rare and emotionally stirring look into Rob's character. While the chapter is about Rob, it is somewhat disorienting at first because it places the reader directly into the narrative, beginning with the sentence, "Your friends are pretending to be all kinds of stuff, and your special job is to call them on it" (186). Since second person is rarely used in the context of novels, it takes a moment to understand exactly who "you" is in the chapter, but it later becomes an effective technique in heightening emotional impact, much as prolepsis did in previous chapters. In her article about second-person narrative, Jarmila Mildorf draws a distinction between conversational and literary uses of "you" narration, stating that, "Literary you-narratives constitute a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that defies easy categorization" (4). While it is clear that Egan's use of "you" falls under the category of literary you-narratives, she takes an approach that is not often used, using the "you" narration to tell the story of the protagonist, rather than to address the reader, which is a more common use for second person narratives. By placing the reader inside the head of Rob, she connects the reader to her protagonist in a more intimate way, making his death at the end of the chapter even more striking since we have just experienced the previous events through his eyes. The reader experiences Rob's death almost as if it was their own, as Egan writes,

"As you flail, knowing you're not supposed to panic--panicking will drain your strength--your mind pulls away as it does so easily, so often, without your even noticing sometimes, leaving Robert Freeman Jr. to manage the current alone while you withdraw to the broader landscape, the water and buildings and streets, the avenues like endless hallways, your dorm full of sleeping students, the air thick with their communal breath. You slip through Sasha's open window,

floating over the sill lined with artifacts from her travels: a white seashell, a small gold pagoda, a pair of red dice. Her harp in one corner with its small wood stool. She's asleep in her narrow bed, her burned red hair dark against the sheets. You kneel beside her, breathing the familiar smell of Sasha's sleep, whispering into her ear some mix of *I'm sorry and I believe in you and I'll always be near you, protecting you, and I will never leave you, I'll be curled around your heart for the rest of your life*, until the water pressing my shoulders and chest crushes me awake and I hear Sasha screaming into my face: Fight! Fight! Fight!" (207)

This passage is important in understanding Egan's intended use of "you," because it heightens the reader's experience of Rob's death by placing them directly in the water as Rob. It is also more poignant when Egan switches back to first person, and suddenly Rob realizes he is dying as the water "crushes" him awake. By switching to first person only at the very end, she underscores the final impact of Rob's death when we are suddenly ripped from the "you" voice to Rob's "I" voice. The entire chapter is written in a somewhat dream-like state, until Rob's death, when he finally wakes up fully into the world and takes charge of the narrative, only to realize that he is drowning. Although we know he dies because Sasha's daughter tells us later on, the switch to "I" marks his final thoughts, when he imagines Sasha telling him to fight. Although I employ the second-person voice in a different way within my own writing, I was inspired by the emotional impact the voice can have that cannot be achieved with a first-person voice. In my story *Loss*, I employed second-person narrative to achieve the dream-like state that Egan does in her chapter about Rob. However I did not switch to another voice because I wanted to keep the

reader immersed in the narrator's voice rather than jar the reader into a realization as Egan does in her chapter.

In addition to her use of second-person narrative voice, Egan uses non-traditional techniques of story-telling, most prominently in her chapter titled, "Great Rock and Roll Pauses." The chapter is narrated by Sasha's daughter, Allison, and gives us insight into Sasha as both a young character and as a mother, rounding out her story in a way that would have been difficult in the context of her other stories. I was interested in Egan's use of a child narrator to reveal important plot points, as well as the way she presented the chapter in the form of a powerpoint presentation, which brought an unexpected feeling of youthfulness to the chapter. Since I was exploring the relationship between a mother and daughter in my own writing [Kimberly and Ivy], I thought it would be beneficial to explore the daughter's voice when she was younger. While I had previously made the connection through brief mentions and flashbacks, I was struck by the level emotion Egan was able to create by seeing the character of Sasha through the eyes of her child, and I wanted to create a similar effect in my own writing.

While Egan's story is told in a more disconnected format, with many separate blurbs and bullet-points, I chose to create a vignette using a list that my character Ivy writes about her mother. Not only did the list allow me to include details that did not fit into the narrative structure of my other stories, it was effective in illustrating the relationship between Ivy and her mother, and allowed me to give the reader a glimpse into Ivy's childhood in a space-effective format. Ivy briefly mentions her father, who is not talked about in the other stories, and includes small details about her mother that the reader would not otherwise know, such as "red lipstick makes her brave" (25). Egan's powerpoint is much more extensive, detailing many aspects of the

narrator's childhood as well as intimate details about her parents' relationship and her father's difficulty connecting to his son, Lincoln (249). Because Egan reveals the information in short blurbs given on slides, she is able to include far more information than would have been possible within the confines of a traditional short story.

In *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, Egan presents the reader with thirteen individual short stories which eventually come together to produce a striking and emotionally stirring novel. Egan's stories span across generations, and it is through her use of prolepsis and carefully constructed narrative voice that she is able to create a traceable thread that connects otherwise separate narrative arcs. While some chapters are more intimately connected than others, each story has its own unique position in the larger narrative, and each character plays an important role in the structure of the novel as a whole. In my own writing, I employ prolepsis and second-person narration for the same reasons, and these techniques have made it possible to connect my short fiction into a more emotionally purposeful and formationally cohesive final product.

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The Undertaker For Dreamers—
Lily Hobbs

The radio beside the bed is playing out some second-rate, desperate love song on low volume, and Jace is kissing my neck, unaware that he forgot to turn the stereo off the night before. My toes are sticking out from underneath the covers, my purple nail polish faded from weeks of neglect--they curl as his lips press into my skin, leaving a trail of tiny purple dots that I will have to cover up with cheap foundation. From somewhere downtown the smell of burnt toast floats through the open window, and the breeze flutters my boyfriend's Purple Sunlight poster that hangs next to the closet across from our bed, directly above the old Toshiba TV set that we bought at a garage sale last spring. I remember once in 8th grade learning that the smell of burnt toast is actually the smell of the burning bodies that come from the crematorium on the corner of West Elm and 6th Street. Although it's a fact I've known for years, today it sticks to my skin and bleeds into the rest of everything. I always hated the idea that I was breathing in dead people, it made me feel violated in a strange way. I push Jace off me. I can't lie in bed with him and be draped with the scent of death any longer.

I start to get ready for work. While I'm washing my hair in the shower, I breathe in the smell of rosy Herbal Essence shampoo, and wonder what it would be like if that scent floated through my window instead. Death would seem much less intimidating if bodies burned to the scent of summer roses. I hum my boyfriend's favorite Purple Sunlight song as I scrub the night off of my skin. The water cascades over my body and then down the drain towards the sewage, becoming nothing but soapy waste. A clump of long brown hair mattes

itself to the shower drain, and I leave it there as a reminder that I am still alive and leaving pieces of myself behind as proof.

I make a piece of toast for breakfast, like I do every morning, but today I find myself thinking that it might be oddly satisfying to work at a crematorium. Nothing is ever left unfinished—besides the business of the dead. You go to work with a set to do list, and finish the day with a neat pile of ashes that you send home with a family, wrapped up neatly in a box. I imagine the bereaved that come to pick them up must be alarmingly quiet, introspective and existential in a way that only grief can allow.

There is never awkward conversation over coffee breaks or small talk about families in the elevator. You can probably dress however you want. I open up the newspaper that was left at the front door and flip through the obituaries. One is for a girl named Sofia from the local high school, she was only 17. I stare at her picture for a long time, and she begins to look almost familiar. She has long blonde hair and a kaleidoscope of freckles across her ivory skin. I find myself thinking that she is far too beautiful for cremation. My mother told me once that she had a friend who died when she was only 17, and today I make her up in my head as if she were Sofia. While I spread butter across my toast I imagine her life as vividly as if I had been there with her. I have imagined a million different lives for my mother's friend, a million different names. But Sofia sticks more prominently than any of them, and even as I pour the last of my coffee into the kitchen sink, she will not leave me. I text my mother and ask her what color hair her friend had, but she doesn't reply. My mother's loss has been draped across her face for my entire life, but this is the first time I

have ever spoken about it. I begin to feel guilty for not giving her more warning, but she is always in the past, even if I don't ask her about it--so I let it go.

The bus I take to work stops one block away from my apartment complex, and as I walk there today my mind is full of useless static noise. I watch the old woman who owns the coffee shop across the street unlock the door with shaking hands, lumber inside and begin switching on the lights one by one. There is no way she can run the business for much longer, at least not without help. Soon she will be one of the smells I breathe in while I am lying in bed, trying to ignore the burnt-toast smell while I float between sleeping and real life. She seems traditional, though, so maybe she will have a burial service. They will paint her lips with red lipstick, her family will choose her favorite turquoise dress to have her put in. Her thin white hair will be curled and her nails painted a bright and cheerful shade of pink. I hope she has a family and a favorite turquoise dress, but when I see her in the mornings she is always alone.

I imagine some days I will jump off of the blue bench while I am sitting waiting for the bus, run inside and ask her if I can have her business. It is a silly fantasy, but I picture her smiling and handing me the keys, walking out and leaving her life's work to me. It would be peaceful to be surrounded by the smell of coffee beans all day long. I think we are friends, in a way, both spending our morning in the same place. Both of us alone in our own particular way. Both of us lost inside ourselves in a way we cannot quite explain. I start to wonder about Sofia's burial service, will she be buried? What color dress will she wear? I imagine it to be a deep and effervescent blue, the color of the ocean when the sun hits the water just so on the brightest days of summer. Her mother will not be able to look at her,

but her father, he won't be able to look away. I picture my mother at 17, leaning into the casket of her dearest friend and stifling back tears, stroking her friend's white-blond hair, breathing the loss in as if it were sweet air. She will think about that moment every day for the rest of her life, her happiness always tarnished with the memories of what feels like a past life. Sofia's mother will do the same--she will never stop. I begin to hope that Sofia is cremated, and that her parents will spread her ashes across the coast of Italy, or beneath the Eiffel Tower in France. I picture them smiling softly, the way people do when they let go of something they know must leave them. I picture them eating croissants and drinking french coffee at a cafe, laughing about the way Sofia used to wake them up each morning, even at seventeen, begging them for chocolate chip pancakes. I am wrong, though, Sofia will be cremated shortly after her memorial service, but her mother will not be able to spread the ashes when it is time. She will just hug them to her chest and cry out endlessly for her lost heart. She will cry so hard and so often that her husband will leave her, and she will hang herself in Sofia's old bedroom on the third anniversary of her death, surrounded by the pale pink wallpaper Sofia picked out when she was thirteen and dreamed of one day being a ballerina.

I am still new at work and people are always reintroducing themselves to me in the elevator, even after excruciatingly long meetings that should have given them time to memorize me. Today it is a middle-aged man named Tommy from HR. He has a receding hairline that he tries to compensate for with too much hair gel. He is well dressed but smells like stale cigarette smoke. I tell him I work in the advertising department, and he tells me about his family, and how he used to want to move to a big city and become an

editor. Like most people in the building he seems to have lost any hope for exit, and even as he tells me how much he loves living in town, I can sense a familiar desperation to break free. I picture myself in this same elevator 20 years from now and cringe. Small talk always depresses me. I have always wanted to be a writer, but something about our mundane setting has sucked the inspiration right out of me, and all my words have run dry. I think one day I will write the story of my mother's friend, the story of her imagined life. I daydream about her often, but today I am distracted, today I think only of Sofia.

All day I stare at the poster that hangs next to the clock in the break room. I can see it from my cubicle. It's a picture of a zip-lining man reaching his hands out to both sides as he flies down the rope into the jungle. *I would rather die of passion than of boredom*, it says. Looking around the office I think if it were any more stripped of passion, it would be a graveyard. I hope that Sofia died passionately. I hope I will, too.

After you die, the undertakers goes through a detailed process just to make you look slightly less dead so your family can see you. They thread a needle through your jaw to keep it your mouth centered on your face, and put in small plastic cups called eye caps to keep your eyes from popping open during a viewing. Once they've drained your blood and pumped you full of formaldehyde, you are almost a perfect imitation of someone sleeping peacefully, but it is a very fragile ruse. I'm not sure why I remember these facts—I think I looked it up after my grandmother died. I appreciate the careful artistry of morticians but decide the job isn't for me. It seems almost deceitful to create a vision of the living dead, but it is noble in its way. I stop myself from looking up the details while I'm at work, but I wonder all day about the lengths we will go to to maintain the intricately constructed

details of our lives, where death does not exist and we all end up together when it's over. I wonder if my mother once cushioned herself with the promises of some religious afterlife, but I cannot help but think how fragile they must have been to deconstruct so wholeheartedly if she had.

The rest of the work day is so muffled in Sofia's loss that I can barely breathe when I finally leave my stagnant office behind. On the bus ride home I cry for Sofia, for her mother, and for the family I never knew. I think about the way loss ripples out in small waves at first, and then grows large, moving out into everything. I decide to call my mother when I get home, to tell her that I will keep her loss safe for her, even after she is gone. I try her on the way up the stairs to my apartment, but she doesn't pick up, so I decide I'll try again tomorrow, when the day is fresh and she has forgotten about my intrusion into her private memories.

When I get home my boyfriend has already returned from work and he's heating up a bowl of leftover spaghetti in the kitchen. He kisses me on my forehead when I walk through the door, only half excited that I'm home. He used to be a drummer in a band called Easttown Noise, but now he works for a textbook company, managing sales. When we first met we fell asleep surrounded by visions of our future, of our promised wild and artistic life, but now we hardly speak, and I turn the light off each night because we are both eager to escape the day. Our dreams have a funny way of escaping us when we have to pay rent. That night I fall asleep with my head on his chest, listening to the sound of his heartbeat. I picture the blood pumping rhythmically throughout his body, moving from his chest to his toes and back again, happy to know that for now he is still existing in the same place as me.

Once I am asleep I dream about a funeral. I think at first it is for the old woman that owns the coffee shop, or maybe for Sofia, but when I walk to the casket I see that it's for me. It is already sitting halfway open, and the closer I get the faster I begin to move. I have to walk up a series of small steps to get a good look, and when I make it to the last step I trip and am propelled forward, staring myself right in the face. My brown hair is straight and brittle on either side of my face, and my skin is pale. I reach out to touch my hand—my fingernails have been painted a ghastly shade of green. *So young*, someone whispers as they quickly pass by.

Everyone is moving around me in a rhythmic motion that reminds me of an assembly line. They look at me briefly and then move on, seemingly unaffected by everything. I turn away, afraid that if I stare at myself any longer, my eyes will pop open, a thought that makes everything around me feel oppressive and cold. There are pale pink roses surrounding the steps that lead up to the casket, but when I reach out to touch one it crumbles away, disappearing into the grey carpet floor of the open room. I smell roses, but this time the sweetness is nauseating and heavy. I begin to run colliding with my mother. There are tears streaming down her face, and they slip into me when I reach out to her, they cascade in tidal waves down the center of my chest.

I wake up gasping for air as though I have been underground all this time, and when I look over at Jace he is lying on his back, his hands crossed as though they have been placed that way strategically to make him look peaceful. I have the sudden desire to shake him awake just to make sure that he is still there breathing, but I let him sleep, worried he might not understand the earthquake going on inside of me. I take deep breaths and lie still,

thinking that if someone walked in right now we might look like two people sharing a double casket. The rest of the night seems just as stagnant and cold, and even when the orange sunlight begins to glow quietly through the open curtains, I feel somehow stuck in a state of persistent night. I run to the kitchen and pull the newspaper out of the trash. The pages are crumpled and ripped, but I search until I find Sofia's obituary until I find the location of her memorial service. I call in sick to work, take the bus in a direction I have never gone before--past downtown and toward the outskirts of the city, where if you squint hard enough, you can see the beginning of the countryside muffled against the slew of hotels and outlet malls that signal the end of the county. I get off at the stop closest to the funeral home, and as soon as it is within view I see who I presume to be Sofia's mother, her arms wrapped around someone in helpless grief.

I can tell even from afar that it must be Sofia's sister. She has the same white-blond hair and freckled skin from the obituary, the same bow-shaped mouth, but it is bent in an expression of pain. Even in her sadness she is beautiful, a younger version of the sister she lost. I wonder for a moment if I should turn back, but I keep walking, toward the brokenness and the tangible loss and the feeling that the world is stretching quickly out from under me and I cannot catch my breath. I pass by Sofia's sister, who is clutching Sofia's mother, her fragile frame is bent by sorrow. The church is a swarm of people that seem hungry for the scent of loss, hungry to witness this family's pain. I am dressed in black like the rest of them, but I suddenly feel like I am on display, and I rush to the bathroom to try and steady my hands, which have begun to shake. When I finally emerge the congregation of funeral-goers is seated, and I can see from the back of the room that Sofia's

casket is open, and her mother and sister are leaning over it in a confused and wild state. I look around for a pastor but there doesn't seem to be one present. It is funny the way we associate religion so strongly with loss, because if there is one thing the room seems void of, it is hope. Hope that this death means something, hope that there will be a reunion in some imagined place. I watch as Sofia's father approaches and guides his remaining daughter away from the casket, leaving her mother to stand there, waiting for the world to fall back into place.

I turn to rush away before someone wonders about me but before I do I realize that Sofia is wearing a red dress, not blue, and it somehow sets me off kilter, and I feel like I might fall directly through the floor and into the imagined funeral I dreamt up the night before. I run back to the bus stop as fast as I can manage, and as soon as I'm out of sight I begin to hate myself for intruding on this family's private pain. I cannot get the mother and sister out of my head, their loss sticks to me as I board the bus, it stays with me as I walk up the stairs, back to my apartment. When I walk in Jace is still in bed, sleeping late because he doesn't work on Thursdays. I crawl into bed and press myself up against him, searching for the warmth of his body against my own. He doesn't speak, he just pulls me in and whispers to me until the world begins to seam itself back together again, until my phone buzzes and it's my mother, and she's only written two words. She's repeated them twice, to be sure they sink into me with the rest of the mysteries. *Maybe Someday, Maybe Someday.*

Loss

You tell your mother over the phone you will be strong on your daughter's first day of school, that you will not cry dropping her off or scare her away from wanting to learn about the vast and infinite qualities of the world, qualities you have kept hidden for years from her, afraid that if she found out there was life outside of you, outside the home you built for her, she would leave you. You have been very careful about everything up until now. You have never turned the news up loud enough for the terrifying world to leak under the cracks of her bedroom doorway and fill her dreams with otherness, you have never left her alone in the house with a stranger who might tell her that not everyone is soft like her. You have not told her the real reason for the absence of her father, you have only told her fairytales that stand in for the truth.

You named her after your best friend, the one who died when you were barely 17, two weeks after your birthday. The minute you looked into her vast and beautiful eyes, you felt something come together inside of you, something you thought had already traveled irrevocably away from you, unreachable to your hands. But as soon as you met her, you knew she was there to take some of the loss out of the cavern inside of you, to carve the marble into soft clay, to mold it into something more manageable, to remind you of what it is you had believed in when you were 17 and planning a life full of wild youth and hungry experience. You plan to tell her, on her first day of kindergarten, about the girl she is named for. You think it will make her brave. But you chicken out before you even say the first few sentences that you have planned. They crawl back inside of you and hide behind the rest of

you, drape themselves across your heart where they will stay hidden for years. Where they will stay hidden for decades. They jump out at you as you flip pancakes on the skillet, pop out with the heat. *Her name was Ivy. She looked a lot like you.* Your daughter will not ask you about her for many years, but one day she will send you a message out of nowhere, asking for her name. You will be too afraid to tell her it belongs to her. Too afraid to tell her you have created her around the fading memory of your lost heart. It will not be until you have almost disappeared from her reach that you will pull her into your chest, into your shallow heartbeat and whisper to her the secrets of your lost and broken youth.

You dress her in pink, your best friend's favorite color, and decide it is enough for her to be wrapped in the essence of her, because the story seems to be too much for her fragile form to bear. *She had green eyes, though, and yours are blue,* you speak inside of yourself. *She loved to tell scary stories, and she had a wonderful gift for ballet.* You walk your daughter out of the car and strap her tightly into the backseat, you check the buckle three times to be sure she will not try to fly away from you. You drive past the trees that are still full and green with the warmth of summer, and you turn the radio on, because you know your daughter will sing along. Keep you both safe within her melodies. She is only 5 but she already carries wisdom in her eyes that frightens you every time you look at her. Her hair is dark like her forgotten father's but her eyes are two wild echoes of you. Neither of you speak as you pass by the quiet familiarity of your neighborhood, neither of you speak as you pull up to the parking lot, and watch the other families walk into the building, toward their large and beautiful and uncontained futures. You grab her hand as tightly as she'll let you and lead her away from the car, up the sidewalk and into the surrounding noise of

everything you cannot keep her safe from. She smiles up at you--her face is eager and earnest and filled with a lightness you can hardly bear to imagine you once had, too. You keep your mouth shut tight to keep the words about your darkness from flying out of you without warning--when you finally part your lips it is to tell her she looks like a fairy princess, and that she is brave and smart and strong, *just like you were, just like you were, just like you were.*

From the Journal of Ivy Elizabeth Warren: DO NOT OPEN UNLESS YOU ARE IVY ELIZABETH WARREN

A list of facts about my mother, and stuff she says when she thinks no one important is listening

1. No matter where you are in the world, if you close one eye, the moon is never bigger than your thumb... I think she stole this from a Nicholas Sparks book, but I guess it counts when she says it too
2. Sometimes people die. That's it.
3. She likes to be left alone on Sundays, to think about silence for a while, and take a bubble bath, god forbid
4. My father was a bastard, wait, don't repeat that, seriously, don't go to school and repeat that
5. She was going to name me Janey, when she used to imagine me inside her belly, but then she got caught up in the path of everything she used to be, and she named me Ivy instead
6. You don't have to be the most beautiful girl to be the bravest girl
7. She actually did love my father, that's how I came to be
8. Sometimes she still misses him, she didn't tell me, but I hear her whisper his name in her sleep sometimes, so I know it must be true
9. There are a lot of different countries in the world, but they all look up at the same stars and at the end of the day, everyone ends up in the same place
10. Where do they go?
11. She didn't tell me that part, but I think it scares her
12. She doesn't talk about it very often, only if she's feeling really brave that day
13. Red lipstick makes her brave
14. She had a friend who died once that she hardly ever talks about, except to say that's why she has so much extra space in her heart to love me
15. Lilies are her favorite flower
16. Pink peonies remind her of funerals
17. Wednesday is her favorite day of the week
18. Mondays are the WORST !!!!
19. She used to have a cat named Pickle, but it got hit by a car
20. Pickle only had one eye, but he had 3 extra toes on each paw
21. One day when we get a cat, I get to choose its name
22. I think I want to name it Mufasa, because it sounds extra brave
23. In my head, my mother's friend is named Belle, because it reminds me of a princess
24. Last year she was Iris for most of the year
25. I imagine her to have brown hair, just like mine
26. I search for pictures when my mother leaves
27. I never find any.

My Mother's Lost Friend

Ivy's mother had been raised in the country, and to Ivy, her closed-mindedness was attributed to nothing other than being a country girl with no exposure to the outside world. Ivy's grandfather was a farm-boy named Tommy who was a terrible racist but a nice enough man. Ivy had heard all his stories, but her personal favorite was the time he tried to castrate the farm cats to keep them from reproducing and keeping the quail population down; he'd wanted to hunt the quail himself. It was one of his most infamous tales, but whenever he told the story about the cats, she'd belly laugh, deep and unadulterated, and so would her mother. Ivy's mother rarely laughed, but Tommy could always pull a giggle out of her, regardless of the horrific tale he was weaving. Ivy had always liked visiting her grandparents for this reason. Her grandmother was a horrible cook but she told marvelous stories that were only outdone by her grandfather's. They brought a lightness to her mother that she rarely saw, and it was on the farm that she first learned about her grandfathers childhood, and then later about her mother's. A lost time that her mother never spoke about except to say that she was glad she had escaped and that Ivy was lucky to live in a big city and have a lot of friends and to never wake up before the sun did.

Tommy's childhood on the farm, of course, was a world that existed outside of her mother's. He had been a young man during World War II, but he was able to avoid it, his story was never marred with the loss of brothers--- although much later, in another time, it would be marred with the loss of his oldest son. Ivy hadn't learned about her

mother's brother until much later, but when she was old enough her grandfather told her stories, starting with meeting his beloved wife, and spanning outwards to the birth of Ivy's mom.

He had met Ivy's grandmother while he was away at college, the first of his siblings to attend. He had married her when she was only 17, two years younger than him, and as soon as he graduated with his degree in agriculture they moved back to his parents' farm, built a small house on the family property, and began having children. His wife's name was Donna. Together they built a life and a family from the ground up, and for most of their lives, had an exceedingly happy marriage.

It was strange for Ivy to imagine her mother there as a young girl, growing up so far from any towns and seeing only the world her parents had constructed within their property lines. She'd been homeschooled by her parents, one of their famous failures as teachers was the book titled "when man walked with dinosaurs." Ivy had it displayed prominently now on her coffee table. It was a glorious conversation piece. To her grandparents, Ivy was an anomaly. She'd been raised in the city and had liberal friends, and on her last visit before her grandfather died she had come in high heels, barely able to navigate the indoor terrain, let alone step outside to help with what needed to be done. They had held onto their dairy all these years, leaving equal parts to each of the remaining children, who had gathered at the farm soon after, and unanimously voted to sell their parent's life work to the Dutch dairy man that lived a few miles away. Ivy's mother in particular wanted nothing to do with the place after her father died. She said it was too full of ghosts. Unlike some of her cousins, Ivy hadn't protested. She had a fair

amount of emotional attachment to the farm, but didn't want to upset her mother. They'd moved Ivy's grandmother, Donna, into a nursing home soon after. Even Donna didn't complain about the selling of the property. It hadn't been under her name to begin with, and she had no desire to retain a physical reminder of her late husband. She was too broken to live there without him, and she was happy to move into town and have her children and grandchildren close by.

As Ivy understood it, her mother had been isolated from all reaches of civilization until a girl about her age moved into the house right across the road when she was 10. The new neighbor brought with her a myriad of experience previously unbeknownst to Ivy's mother, and a radio that told them stories about places that were very far away. No one ever told Ivy her name, and she was usually just referred to as "your mother's friend," or, "that girl."

The conversation around her was always sparse, and if Ivy's Aunt Karen was around, it came to a halt completely. It was the girl's death that had broken her, after all—at least that's what Ivy's mother always said. Ivy's mother was called Kimmy Lee back then, switching to Kimberly only when she escaped the countryside, which was full of Mary Sues and Ida Janes and Cara Belles. Her transition to the serious Kimberly was also attributed to her friend on many occasions, but she would never say why. It wasn't until Ivy visited her Aunt Mary, her mother's famous hippie sister, that she found out the whole story. She never told her mother all that she knew, and even Mary wouldn't mention the girl's name. The family carried the secret around, keeping it from each other. It was a collective tragedy that kept them all awake at night.

It had happened in 1977, on the tail end of the Vietnam War. It had been over for two years by then, but the effects were still radiating throughout the country, seeping into places you least expected it. The world was on fire with free love and change, but the girls' isolation kept them cocooned from everything. Even after the oldest daughter ran off to join the hippies, the family remained relatively stable, refusing to acknowledge the political uproar, hardly ever speaking of their eldest, Jimmy, who was already a scar of pain on the family's heart. He had joined the army in '65, and died the very same year. Kimmy Lee had been too young, then, to really understand the full implications of her brother's death. She had seen the American flag folded up and handed to her mother and father at the door of their quiet house. She could remember standing on the tips of her toes to peer at his cold figure, whose elegance and grace even war could not mar. The draft wouldn't begin for another four years, and then almost everyone she knew would tell a similar story. At five years old death was barely a whisper in her vocabulary, but she felt it everywhere she looked growing up.

But she had not been as aware as her oldest sister, Mary, who still had the death stitched into her heart as a badge of rebellion, who left as soon as she turned eighteen to fight the good fight against violence. Kimmy's siblings spanned from Jimmy, who would have been twenty-three the spring that she turned ten, to the youngest, Sissy, who had just turned five. There were seven total, a relatively normal number for an upright Christian bunch, but the death of their beloved eldest left them with six, the youngest of whom had yet to be born when her brother lost his life.

The war would still rage for five more years when Kimmy Lee's best friend turned up across the road. She came from Cincinnati originally so she'd been touched by the outside, a rarity in Clayton, which was not so much a town as it was a block of land with a few houses. Kimmy Lee has been tasked the day of her arrival with bringing her a heaping pan of peach cobbler. She had been overjoyed with the anticipation of someone her own age, outside of her family, to play with.

The girl and Kimmy Lee were fast friends, and Kimmy found in her a new teacher, one who had been friends with children that had dark skin, who hung out with older girls that taught her the appropriate way to style her hair, and who had seen footage of dead soldiers being carted back in to the U.S by the thousands. Kimmy Lee's family never had a television growing up, so she relied on her friend to tell her about everything that existed beyond where they were. She seemed much older than 10, the way she discussed the events with compassion and precision. She'd had an older brother once, too, and it was because of his loss that her parents had sent her to the country to be with her aunt and uncle, Clive and Betty. They were no Einsteins but they could keep a kid safe, and most importantly, away from the threat of violence on television and the riots that were taking place within the cities.

Kimmy Lee's parents begrudgingly allowed the girl to join their homeschool program, and by the time the war was over, the girls had become two firecracker 15-year-olds, an inseparable pair that followed Kimmy Lee's older cousin Karen around with unbreakable fascination. When they were younger they would make games out of anything. They would weave bracelets from the blue bonnets that grew in patches along

the road, and make fairy circles from the rocks underneath the oak trees on the surrounding property. By the time they were fifteen, though, there wasn't much to do except grow up.

Karen was the only sophisticated older girl they knew, but at seventeen she was barely an adult herself, although she fancied herself one. She lived a few miles down the road with Kimmy Lee's aunt and uncle, but she practically moved in with Kimmy's family during her tumultuous teenage years, making her more of a sister to Kimmy Lee than anything else. She parted her long brown hair down the middle, and she always had her fingernails painted a deep and sultry red to match her lips. She had a boyfriend named Steve who would sneak in her bedroom window nearly every night, and the stories of her sexual escapades kept Kimmy Lee and the girl entertained for hours. Kimmy Lee was curious, but in a more innocent way. Her friend was curious in a way that was hungry, dangerous even. She had a bountiful eagerness for the world that signaled disaster from the start. Despite her outward bravery, though, she had a timid innocence that struck the other girls, a naive desire to learn about life in the country that opened their eyes to the beautiful simplicity of being separate.

Karen and Kimmy Lee taught her how to milk the cows, and woke her up early in the mornings each day when they went to feed the sheep. There were always young lambs being raised by Kimmy's father, and the girls bottle fed them each day before they started their other chores. The girl had never seen a tractor before moving, and Kimmy Lee and Karen laughed at the way she jumped every time they turned it on. They never did any heavy work but they drove it around often, showing her new

clearings they found or taking her to the spot where the coyotes hunted every night to watch them run in quick rhythms toward their hunting ground in the woods. In the afternoon the girls would have their school lessons, but by nightfall they were always free to roam, and they took advantage of adventure where they could find it.

The night the girl died it was mid-August, two weeks after Kimmy's seventeenth birthday. The air was heavy with humidity and mosquitos and the girls' boredom so thick it could have been scraped off the window of Karen's boyfriend's truck. They had planned to go mudding in the afternoon and drive out to town and convince one of their townie friends to buy them beer, but when night fell they stayed where they were, perplexed by the sudden abundance of shooting stars above them. Ivy's mother would tell her later that this was the Perseid meteor shower, and since that night she had always been haunted by its yearly occurrence, refusing to go outside and watch, while Ivy often lay out on the porch for hours to watch the sky come alive. It was never so alive as it was the night Kimmy's best friend, died, though. That night, there was a unique abundance of falling stars.

And so the four of them, Steve, Karen, Kimmy, and the girl stopped where they were and lay across the back of the pickup truck, looking up toward the endless sky. They were infinitely youthful but felt much older than they were. Steve and Karen snuck into the backseat as Kimmy Lee and her friend laid side by side, wondering about the world outside of themselves. Their blonde hair spun together into one as they laid there, the girl's eyes were bright and green, Kimmy's were a raging an insistent blue. They could have been twins if it wasn't for their difference in height, but Kimmy had her legs

curled up tightly in a ball, and in the night they were just the same. Her friend promised to take Kimmy Lee to Cincinnati one day to visit her family and she told her about her brother for the first time in any real detail. His name was Tommy, just like Kimmy Lee's grandfather. She pictured him as he must have been, handsome and young and brave, just like her own brother. She wondered about them, the brothers, peering down at the two girls from the sky, looking into them and smiling at the way they were free and alive and had never been touched by real pain, they probably marveled at how small they were. It made Kimmy Lee feel safe to have them both up there watching over her.

They all fell asleep there, in the truck, and hours later when they woke up the sun was just beginning to peek through the sky. It was Karen's idea to go down to the river, where they'd all been many times, and watch the sun come up before they had to go back home. So the four of them packed up the truck and made their way down the road toward the place where the trees met in thick ribbons above them in the sky, they all made a wish as they passed under the tunnel of brilliant green, and even in the dim light they felt the heat rush in on them from the magnificent sky.

Kimmy Lee ran ahead, down through the thickets of brush toward the bank, and she heard Steve shout from up above that he wanted to hike up farther, to their favorite jumping point. It was well known between them that Kimmy's friend hated heights, but Karen knew she wouldn't back down from a dare, and as they came to the clearing atop the cliff, she started teasing her about being afraid. Calling her chicken and making her blush. The girl had never jumped before but had seen the other three do it many times. No one had ever dared her yet to jump, but the stars had made them all dizzy and brave

and full of glee for life and the feeling of being young and separate from the world. And so before anyone could tell her how to jump she put her hands together and dove. The other three peered down at her in a perplexed horror, and it wasn't until they ran down from the cliff and to the side of the riverbank that they saw the crimson water lapping at their feet. Karen began to wail and collapsed to the ground, a pathetic bundle of tears. She never recovered from having been the one to dare her. She was never right in the head.

Steve tried with all his strength to pull the girl from the water, but it fought him. When he finally pulled her out she was already cold and lifeless and they carried her to the truck quickly, but devoid of hope. He drove as madly as anyone could and when they finally got into town, the corners of her mouth and fingertips were blue and her skin was pale and white. And so the three of them had to tell her aunt and uncle what had happened and when her mother arrived to town for the funeral, they had to tell her. It shattered them in different ways. Steve drank to forget and Kimmy Lee fell silent. Karen nearly lost her mind. And none of them, even their families, could bear the thought of speaking her name aloud.

At the funeral Ivy's mother gave a heart wrenchingly beautiful speech, which was recounted to Ivy by her Aunt Mary. She spoke about their childhood beneath the oak trees and the way her best friend used to dance ballet with the cattle before she milked them and would tell her stories about the war in a way that made it sound less like violence and more like a ballad from an old book. She made it a place where her brothers fought and died for something, she made it sound like it meant something,

even if she herself thought it didn't. And that was the story that Ivy knew, and she never learned more about the girl, except small snippets revealed to her when her mother would grow quiet and sad and blurt one out before catching herself and stopping her heart from jumping out of her chest.

And after Ivy's mother spoke she never told the stories about her friend again, but she kept them safe within her heart, and always thought of her when she saw the color pink, or drove past bluebonnets in the summer, and when she named her baby girl, her innocence reminded her so much of the girl that she couldn't help but give her baby the same name as her lost friend. And it wasn't for a long time that she would speak it again when it came to the girl. Ivy became her daughter, and so the family spoke the name again, but never remembered the girl who once lived across the dirt road.

And so Kimberly and her family, even after the death, became one again. And Ivy's grandparents continued to raise dairy cows and the trees still tunneled together on the road, and Kimberly kept wishing, even though it never brought her best friend Ivy back. And Karen became the crazy aunt that held guilt deep inside her and she never married, because the love of her life reminded her only of death. And Kimberly's daughter Ivy thought often about the girl, and she carried the trauma of her family with her wherever she went. She cried for her lost uncle Jimmy and her mother's lost friend, and she felt the sadness seep into her with everything else. And for her entire life she bore the name of the girl she wondered about, and until her mother's death, she never knew.