brogue (brōg), n.

1. a marked accent, esp. Irish or Scottish, when speaking English: *a sweet lilt of brogue in her voice.*

2. any strong regional accent.

3. a rough shoe of untanned leather, formerly worn in parts of Ireland and the Scottish Highlands.
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Belhaven University has published a fine arts journal for many years, probably dating back to the earliest days of the College. In fact, in my office, I have a copy of the Belhaven Anthology: A Garden of Verse printed in 1944 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the college.

That collection is notable because it contains a poem by Elizabeth Spencer, who became Belhaven’s most accomplished alumna in the literary arts. After graduating from Belhaven, Spencer published nine novels, seven collections of short stories, a memoir, and a play. Her novella, The Light in the Piazza, was adapted as a Broadway musical and nominated for eleven Tony Awards in 2005, winning six.

Spencer’s novel The Voice at the Back Door was the only novel nominated by jury for the Pulitzer Prize in 1957, but the Pulitzer Board decided to make no award that year, during a time of rising tensions in the early days of the Civil Rights Movement. Ironically, Spencer’s novel deals with the very issues of social and civil justice, the realities of racial intersections and divides, that fueled the Civil Rights Movement itself. Many have speculated that The Voice at the Back Door was too far ahead of its time to receive the Prize it deserved.

Although writers of Spencer’s caliber come along at near-century intervals, the BFA Program in Creative Writing at Belhaven University seeks to produce this kind of writer nonetheless—writers who speak with clarity into and about ambiguities, writers attuned to their times, writers who ever seek to master craft, who maintain a love affair with life and words, regardless of complications and consternation.

The Brogue represents our annual attempt to present the best of student writing, art, drama, photography, and graphic design at Belhaven. This journal is the product of our thought and labor, a gift to ourselves, to one another, and to you. Whatever glimpses of truth and beauty we found, we lay them here on these pages, a tribute to the truth-and-beauty Maker, a thanksgiving, an offering from our very lives.
It is a thrilling, terrible thing to watch others. The spotlight snaps on. The announcer calls performers from behind the curtains—elephants whose memories now store only tricks, people who play with fire like it’s a toy, artists who suspend themselves over killer heights, moving as if their trust in rope is a simple familial bond. Walking mysteries approach the stage, display their abnormalities. Are you sure you can believe what you see? Nothing exists quite like the spotlight’s shine in a small child’s eyes. She sees the grandeur, the acrobatics. She says, “I want to join the circus.”

When a traveling circus comes to a small town, ordinary citizens thrill with desire to see the new and bizarre. Posters with giant letters appear and rumors spread. People gravitate like moths to light, and seats fill at the show. It’s easy for any individual—not just children—to marvel at the feats and wonder what life would be like behind the curtains, envying a little those who choose the circus life. Each act has its own brand of joy, its own style and mystery. One could never recreate these feats—that’s why one pays to go. Yet when the circus ends—vanishing down the road out of town—it’s the people left behind, with emptier pockets and after-images still burning, who must discover how to carry on. After beauty, danger, and daring disappear, do we continue dreaming about what we saw? Or can we accept difference and live our own unique lives?

We each have our lots—sadness, happiness, weakness, strength, talents, and even mediocrities. If our eyes aim only at the spectacular, we miss the fullness of life we have been given. The circus is a marvelous experience—but life is not a show. We must stop performing and discover what exists in us and about us. We must stop running from place to place, find where we belong, and rest. We must cease our envy of the happiness of others and embrace our own lives—the bad with the good, the strange with the natural, the ordinary with the divine.
YOU WON'T BELIEVE YOUR EYES
I found God she announced, lit a smoke
and put on a new white dress, before dressing
me the same. Where we going? I asked
but she just told me to trust, light
another cig and let her do the rest.

It was in the Tar Heel State, that stream
in back a country Baptist chapel where
I watched the water swallow her whole
devour the blonde of her hair, soil
the white of her Sunday dress
drag her down, spew her out smiling
and waving, yet I saw her old life clinging
with the cloth—slowly browning white—
clutching to her thighs.

The pastor helped her climb up the bank—
past the cloaked choir and immobile bodies
in graves beneath the pine tree—a dark angel rising
from the dregs of the dead stream and alighting,
streaked with mud, on blood red clay

that stained her feet, and stained mine too
as I looked down to my own body, wrapped
in a white shroud, dreading the icy fangs
of water that would—the pastor had said earlier
as he shook my hand— cleanse my soul

but as I reluctantly followed him
into the icy stream, I felt nothing but the rush
of water to drown me under
this stranger’s roaring voice.
The bell rang as the first of the students pushed through classroom doors and started down the hall. The passage was soon filled with teenagers who pressed their way through the crowd. They granted no deference to whose heels they stepped on or whose backpack they jostled. Gail—a tall, dark-haired girl—pushed her way through the center of the hall, eyebrows knit in resentment as she shoved past people until she reached her locker. She twisted the padlock and whipped it out of its hasp with an irritated flip of the wrist.

Students continued to flock around her, past her, next to her; they bumped into her backpack and accidentally kicked at her feet. From above it all, the hallway looked as if it were experiencing an infestation—a swarm of blond-, brown-, and black-haired heads bowed their way through, like parts of one organism that each attempted to break away but had no room to complete the split.

Lauren pushed her way to the side of the hallway by the same locker. She looked at Gail. “Hey,” she said, and that was all.

Gail looked to her left, and the harsh edges of her scowl softened when she saw who it was. “Next time somebody asks me how I’m doing, I’m going to slap them across the face.” She showed no concern for the mass of students who fumbled past her that might have overheard her comment. None seemed to notice, they merely absorbed her words along with the rest of the clamor.

“You do that,” Lauren replied calmly, unfazed.
“Don’t mock me.”
“No, seriously, you have every right,” Lauren assured her in an even tone.
Gail gave no reply. She just stared at the floor as feet shuffled past.
“Why do people even ask that?” she murmured. Her right arm shook out of nervous habit. “What do they expect to hear? ‘My dad just died, but I’m doing great.’ ‘I’m depressed as hell.’ or ‘I feel like a piece of crap today.’ Like, really.”
“I think the idea is that then you’ll know they care about you,” Lauren said.
“They think they’re being nice,” Gail snapped.
“Actually, I’d say probably not. My theory is it’s all based in egocentrism. There isn’t really anything you can tell them in a six-second passing conversation that’s going to be honest or edifying for either of you, but they want you to know that they thought of you, which really, is a thought almost entirely focused on themselves and how they want you to perceive them. They don’t care to hear that you feel like a piece of crap—they just want you to think they care.”

The students continued to pass by as if in a haze, they slowly slunk away down the hall and into classrooms. A few faces familiar to the girls might have noticed the two talking, might have listened for a moment to what was said, might have taken offense at Lauren’s harsh words. If they did, they didn’t stop to show it.

Gail’s intense gaze was fixed on something immaterial. “Wow,” she finally said. “Maybe that’s too harsh,” Lauren said. “No. That makes sense, what you said.”

“I didn’t hate him,” she said, rocking slightly, “I swear I didn’t hate him.”

“I mean, it’s probably not true of all of them, but . . . yeah.”

“Yeah.” Gail’s arm stopped shaking and she straightened up, gaze still fixed on an invisible thought, moment, memory.

The passing period was almost up, and the hall began to empty. It was not silent, but the clamor could now be deciphered into individual remarks, coughs, squeaks of shoes against vinyl. Gail’s face seemed to empty at the same rate as the hallway. Then it was blank, and the hallway was cleared. The two girls were alone in the vacuous space.

The friend said nothing, but did not leave to go to class. “I’m not glad,” Gail said, eyes heavy and pleading. “I swear I’m not happy about this.” The bell rang, and the hallway was filled with a reverberating clang; the sound bounced off the freshly emptied cavity until it died away. Gail sunk down to the floor and leaned back against the lockers. The harsh fluorescent lighting reflected off of the white floor and stung at her eyes, and she blinked rapidly.

“I know you’re not,” Lauren replied, after such a time that Gail had almost forgotten her own words. So many of them flowed through her head; it was hard for her to remember what actually made its way into speech.

“They all think I’m depressed.” Her words came out more cautiously now. They dabbed against the walls of the hallway, they prodded hesitantly into the silence. The words bounced off of the floor, walls, and lockers until they faded away.

“Yes.”

“They all think I should be.”

“That’s what they think, sure.”
“Should I be?” Soft, her words were soft, they melted out of her mouth and poured to the ground, where they vanished between the cracks in the floor.

“You are what you are. You can’t force yourself to be one way or the other.”

But Gail didn’t hear. The empty space was too much; she began to close up into herself. She hugged her knees to her chest to protect herself from the harshness of the cavity.

“I didn’t hate him,” she said, rocking slightly, “I swear I didn’t hate him.” Her eyes were closed tightly now, the confusion, sorrow, and anger barred behind them.

“I know,” Lauren said, unheard reassurances naught but a gentle hum in the otherwise quiet halls. “I know.”
Green dot on the card slot.
Like the green eyes he needed
To get this close
And the heels she needed
To be “That Kind of Girl”
They’re still kittens, but they’re
Trying
Really
Hard.

Last seconds of holding hands,
Which is for outside the door
Inside, the sky’s the limit
And their ginger Skyy cost twenty whole dollars.

This room can’t be apricot walls,
Bad art,
HBO pamphlets.
No inert A/C
There must be a mini fridge.

She bites her lip and tastes Carmex.
He smoothes his white suit and thinks of himself.

Her eyes run down the hallway
To the lobby
What will breakfast taste like there
Tomorrow morning?
You met me for the typical draw of bubblegum payments next to the dock where we used to throw pocket trash in the thick water and made out just once with our freezing feet on smooth pebbles. (I stole your remaining sliver of breath mint.) I’ve surrendered all my thoughts of sailing away from this town and having bagfuls of decency because I don’t have two dimes to rub together. So that’s vanished. Your smile pries open the crevices in my mind while I dwell on your memories of casinos and Spain, a world you’ll go back to, separate from my slate fingers. I listen to the tides that stretch out forever while a drop of your slobber runs down my neck, and I wonder if this garbage you whisper in my ear is something I could treasure, if maybe it’s by the riches, it could still be a precious thing to get used.
THE BROGUE

LANCELOT

BY PAUL! LANG

The unconscious conscience makes the man, makes the metal
Ready and waiting for ethereal, divine aspiration
And so we tread on, through the ages
With no hopes and no Messiah
Gazing with covetous eyes on Mighty Avalon
Where our King sleeps
And I beat my pentangle shield into the dust

We met, tired and worn, in the land of the Franks
We called you ‘Lancelot’ and you gave us a ride
And it’s okay to live without dreams
As long as you have steel in tow
To cross blades with these devils
Who hit on all the ladies

Lancelot, we need to have a little chat
I was there, and heard your blade tear blistering
Skid-marks into the concrete’s armor flat
And Guinevere stood in the rain, no King
Or country to justify her high heels
Or running makeup. You left her behind
Like a soldier going off to war, your wheels
Newly christened lovers, but you didn’t think we’d mind.
The Lady of Shallot still comes over
To cry on my shoulder, and watch Netflix
And tell tales about how beautiful you were.
Your wheels are grand, you’ve got fire in your kicks
Hey! I think Lancelot just stole my car!
It’s not a sonnet anymore
It’s okay to live without dreams
But we can see the blind-spots in your mithril mail

Serpent quelling serpent charmer
Polish up and don your armor
There’s still a war ahead
For all who are not dead
And there will be blood to spill and men to kill, on the bloody road to Avalon

And it’s okay to live without dreams
But we’ll still talk about you like you’re alive
It’s okay to live without dreams
So we’ll follow behind, in the shadow where you left us
We can’t stop dreaming of you

Lancelot, I saw you rip a woman’s heart to shreds
And she cried out to God
And you told her there was none
And it’s okay to live without dreams
But there’s no place for you in Avalon
The rain tonight was a wash-out, flooding New Orleans until it seemed its own ocean with Venetian homes. Lefty was surprised that more cobbles did not flood away with every rain. *Why in all the Hells did they build this city under the sea? I’d have thought they might have learned from the Italians.* He scuffed his boot under the rainwater and pushed down a cobble. He felt it squish back under the mud. Southern mud was a fickle thing.

His true name was Mark Wall, but he no longer went by that—he was Lefty Callahan now. He had skipped off from home not long after the War ended. He let his mother molly-coddle him and his father look proudly upon him, nothing but praise dropping from their lips: their son was a brave warrior. But soon he tired of it; they did not know what had happened in those muddy trenches: the stench, the disease, the conversations and cowardice and human perversions. He had seen it all, and every night he relived it in his dreams. To his parents and neighbors, he smiled and nodded when they mentioned the war—they asked innocently, for they could not help it. Yet, Lefty wondered in the night and during the in-between moments—when nothing happens, when the world waits with breath held for the next thing and recovers from the previous thing, when all that exists is what is in a mind and what shouldn’t be in a mind—how those around him were not covered in mud, in feces, water, bugs, blood; with eyes wide and red, with matted hair, in stinking uniforms; chased by yellow clouds. The old images haunted him through the cleanliness that only those who have never fought can keep. To be clean seemed anathema. To stay clean was a sin.

He stopped one day and could not smile. The next day, he packed a carpetbag, kissed his mother, shook his father’s hand, and walked out the door. He saw the shock on his parents’ faces. Inside, he had felt his frustration welling, but his sudden decisiveness shocked him as well.

The Great War was hell on earth. He caught trench foot. He also caught a grenade, and its blast tore up his right side and pitted his face with...
the shrapnel of dirt, rocks, and fire. He had a few fingers left on his right hand, but they were stiff and awkward. Now, back in the States, he had to use his left hand, hence the nickname.

Bag in hand, his trombone case and sheet music slung over his back, he walked to the bus station. He bought a ticket to the first city that sounded appealing. He brought no stamps, for he had no intention of writing home.

Lefty became a wandering loner, and he joined the ranks of a generation of disillusioned artists. The instrument across his back, however, did not make him a bard. He was not that self-conscious. Lefty Callahan, he called himself. 

Callahan in case he needed to legitimize his identity, and Lefty to deter any further questions about his past. On Basin Street, no one ever gave a real name.

For the last few weeks he had lived in New Orleans, smelled its foods and tasted its scents. He roomed in a slum apartment above a bar, where he heard the nightly sounds of brawling and slurred talk through the cheap floorboards. The yelling of the mindless men below recalled memories of other men. He stared at the ceiling above and waited for the bar to close and the laughter of the whores to subside so that he could sleep in peace.

During the evenings, he played the trombone—the instrument his mother insisted he learned to play in school—at the Blue Flamingo Club. He did not need fine motor skills to push the tubing, just a hand and another arm to steady the thing. God bless his mother’s insistence about lessons. God bless the lucky urge to keep the instrument.

God bless his damned arm and that damned war.

Tonight he hiked to the club and held his trombone case tucked under his coat. Tonight he played for straight cash among other wanderers, and who knew what tomorrow would bring—or if he would even be in New Orleans at all?

“Mark. Mark!”

Lefty turned toward the dark alley to his left. “What? Who are you?”

A man walked out of the alley. The high walls had blocked the rain, but in the open he had to lift his coat collar to keep the water from his neck. “How don’t you recognize my voice? It’s Pap.”

Damn. Why couldn’t they just leave him the hell alone? “Pap? What are you doing here? How did you find me?”

Pap reached a hand out to touch him, but Lefty jerked back. “I’m your father, of course I’m going to find you, no matter how far you run,” Pap said. “Ma’s worried sick. Now get back home, where you belong.”
“No, no thanks. I’m fine out here. And how did you find me?”

“No, Pap. You can’t.” Lefty had never had such a candid conversation with his father. This could not last much longer. “Pap, I... you can’t. Please leave. I’m going.”

“I’ll go with you.”

Lefty pushed his father away again. “No, you aren’t. It’s better if I’m on my own. Everyone’s better off.”

“Ma’s ill, Mark. You need to come home.”

“What a clever ruse that is, so very original. Your mama’s dyin’ so come home and make your peace. Pap, no.”

His father stepped back. “You’re not serious. You can’t be. You live in this dump,” he gestured to the street around, “and live in rags, all alone, and think you’re all right, king of the hill. You can’t see anything clearly. Come home.”

“I know I can’t see anything clearly, which is why I left. Now leave me alone! I’m not coming home.”

“Mark—”

Lefty turned into the rain and his back to his father. “Go!”

Lefty, when he visualized his life, saw himself as a shiny bubble. Floating above him were two other bubbles, his parents, linked by soapy tendrils of light. Before the war, his bubble was tethered to that link in son-ship. After the war, after the world broke and his traditional perceptions of reality shattered, his tether dissolved, and he was free. While Lefty felt no shame in his lack of duty to his parents, he pondered whether his lack of guilt was abnormal, even disgusting. He did not know what he would do if either his or his parents’ bubble would suddenly pop. Tonight, he had popped theirs. Whether in death or in tether, he was cutting all his ties.

“No! No!”

“Leave me alone, dammit!” Lefty yelled. He ran through the rain and ducked into a narrow alley, then zigzagged between streets and houses until he was lost. If he was lost, so his father must be.

Lefty hitched his case tighter against his back and trudged back toward the Blue Flamingo. He did not know if he could continue this ranging trudge of a life. He did not care. The sooner the world ended, all his ties cut and buried, the better for him. His dreams would no longer be, and the rain would stop falling.
Years ago, in another age when
the sun was young and not
yet strong enough
to keep out the cold,
man found it.

Expansive, wild, lustful
firstborn son of anarchy eating away
at the flesh of the earth,
bright morning star incarnate.
But man can leave nothing unconquered.

Stripped, caged, compacted,
power made trinket and tool
the fury of the gods now
hangs lazily from a teenage
rebel’s lips

Even the caged tiger
dying softly as a circus sideshow
sometimes has its satisfaction
in bloodied uprising
so the curse of Prometheus burns
not free and quick as it once did
but slowly, bitterly,
looking its master in the eye.
II
WILD BEASTS
We walked the mud slicken path
which wound beneath the railroad tracks
that were suspended among the trees
by decay nibbled beams

Through the swamps strewn
with garbage and forgotten
Happy Meal boxes

Scavenging
we plucked the glass bottles
from their hidden places
and neatly set them in a row.
Their dirt-smeared greens
and whites sat so close together,
like a delicate necklace

Below, the brown water
hisssed as it broke around
the concrete structure that
rose above the fluid surface

Bottles in hand, we released the
volley in a chaotic spray
until every last one
was shattered
When I was very young, my father
took me hunting on the ranch.
From a camouflage cocoon we watched
a shadow of shadows.

My father rose,
drew bead, and fired—
the world changed.
After blew like a cold gust through Before.
The deer dropped where it stood—
clean shot.

Together we dragged it to the road
and gutted it by Ford high-beams.

Hurried wet clouds rushed from our mouths,
met the slow evanescence from its open
belly, and blended—dancing and dispersing
in the glare.

Cold bit in,
the tang of bile like poison from its teeth.
My child’s thoughts were of warm home—
This one’s pregnant.
My father held up one of the glistening sacks,
Here, look at this.
He slit it like an envelope—businesslike—
and reached inside. Out came a head,

or something like it;
eye-lumps and a mouth to nowhere,
then a loose quartet of putty hooves.
He dropped it in my hand, the slick translucent thing,
and went to put the doe in the truck bed.

I squatted near the gut pile
that hogs would eat by tomorrow
and pranced the fetus like a toy through the air.
I worked its blank jaws and bleated—
    silly in my fascination.

    David.
My father stood by the cab.
He stared—eyes thrown wide open,
his hands clenching a white towel,
    Put it down. Let’s go.

Wedged in the seat,
the rifle scope imprinting a flushed
design on the skin of my thigh,
I looked back.

Our vehicle pushed the scene away,
distance and darkness filling the space.
The moon-brushed caliche
turned taillight red
and faded in the dust.
I am not a runner. But, sometimes I manage to tie on some tennis shoes, crank up my music, and just have at the road. And sometimes, there isn’t a road. Occasionally on the mornings where I actually want to run, I have to traverse a changing terrain ranging from concrete to grass to water to glass. Yes, even glass.

When I go to Jamaica with my mission team, I want to run. It sounds crazy, especially because I usually go in the summer, but running there is different. My alarm goes off early in the morning—the sun has risen just enough to entirely embrace the world in its light and warmth. My roommates don’t want to join me, and I don’t mind, so I quietly slip out of my soft pajamas and into some fresh shorts and a shirt.

Then, and this is undoubtedly the most important part of my running preparations, I have to pull my hair back from my face into a tight ponytail. You see, if I don’t get this right, my whole run will be ruined. When I run, I ponder life, especially surrounded by the gorgeous Jamaican scenery; there is nothing quite as distracting as loose hairs falling in my face as I run. I run my fingers through my hair several times, making sure everything is in its proper place before binding it with the elastic tie that moments prior had been around my wrist.

Once I’m ready, I’m greeted by the warmth of Jamaican sunbeams on my face, and I can feel my pulse pick up in anticipation. I leave my hotel running along the uneven sidewalk. I keep my eyes down to prevent myself from tripping on the irregular undulations of the cracked concrete. The first thing that I notice is the smell of peppers in the garden nursery next door—I keep my eyes on my feet, and my ears tuned to the opposite traffic pattern as my nostrils are attacked by the sting of this vegetable.

Anytime I happen to smell whatever type of pepper this may be, I’ll always think of my morning runs. Smells have a funny habit of reminding me of old memories I have forgotten. Now, the smell of these peppers will always remind me of morning runs from the Gloriana hotel in Montego Bay, Jamaica. My feet thump in a steady rhythm down the sidewalk, and I duck into a side alley, gravel crunching beneath my shoes.
I have to slow my pace here, carefully tiptoeing up to the gate I know will be unlocked—it always is. I wrap my fingers around the cool metal and push. It swings open, and I resume my pace as I sneak through backyards of just awakening Jamaican families. I often wonder what they might think if they saw me, a young, white girl running through their back yard. Would they be concerned? Angry? Entertained? Perhaps they wouldn’t even care. I assume this is the case as no one has ever bothered to chase me off.

It is at this point that my endurance must kick in, and when my troublesome thoughts jostle in my mind. I have a nice, long, flat stretch of sidewalk that runs alongside a little beach. Almost every morning I see young kids splashing in the surf, but I usually ignore them. I choose instead to keep my eyes on the homeless men searching for food scraps in the trash that washed ashore to my left. I feel a twinge of irony as I run past—I run for exercise, but they run for survival. I throw away the trash they hope to use for dinner.

Like I said, this stretch of sidewalk is often my hardest part. This could also be because I know the most beautiful part is just ahead. At the end of the beach, at its “corner,” a dilapidated wall faces me. The homeless men tend to congregate here, whether for emotional or physical support, I don’t entirely know, but I suspect it’s a bit of both. They stop their conversations, beer cans underfoot, and watch as I approach. I nod my head to them and continue towards the water where the wall abruptly ends a few yards into the water.

With a skilled foot, I step lightly on the tips of rocks that just barely break the ocean’s surface that lead out to the end of the wall. My fingers clutch the grooves between the stones of the wall as I hug it close for balance. In a matter of a few short steps, I make it safely to the other side; my shoes dig into the soft sand. I don’t stay long at all and begin my shuffle through the underbrush. Plants of all sorts litter the ground and brush up against my legs, face, and arms. I keep my eyes down, again, treading lightly over the old window that somehow made its way onto this path.

The little shards crinkle underfoot but are slightly muffled in a puddle of mud. I step out of the window frame onto a pile of rusty barbed wire being extra careful not to let it snap back onto my exposed calves. Last time we came to Jamaica a guy on our team had to get stitches when he ran into a piece of protruding rebar. He told us about how bad it hurt to have his wound cleaned without a numbing agent, and I did NOT want to become another victim. In no time, I wriggle out from the plants’ grasp and find myself once more in the brilliant sunshine.

I smile as I begin to jog again. To my left is a small ledge, about six inches tall, with the Atlantic Ocean lapping against its exterior. To my right is a chain link fence, razor wire, and old, rusty barbed wire to keep crazy people like me off of the Montego Bay airport runway. This drastic juxtaposition always leaves me breathless…but that might also be because I’ve been running at a decent pace for quite a while by this point.
I alternate looking to both sides. When I scan the flat horizon of the ocean, I feel incredibly small and insignificant. The sea seems so flat and peaceful; yet, miles out into the calm, storms rage. Tremendous waves are tossed back and forth in the deep, only to become sluggish surf upon the sand. My feet continue a steady tempo in harmony with the crashing of the water, and I swing my gaze to the right.

Roll after roll of barbed wire and razor wire span the distance on my right behind, beside, and ahead of me. Bare and exposed, my legs swish past the treacherous metal. I am careful to stay far from their teeth, remembering the last trip we took. I wince at the memory of the boy who cut his leg—it didn't happen very far from here—but kept up my pace. I find it ironic that the government goes to such lengths to keep vagabonds like myself off the runway along this stretch. I figure that if they really didn't want people on the makeshift path that I now traversed, they ought to stop everyone back at the wall. It doesn't bother me, though. I get to go on these runs because of this oversight.

I follow the arch the path makes. The sun's rays attack my skin, and I can feel the sweat run down my face. My right side under my ribs begins to cramp. I raise my arm above my head and lean slightly to the left in an attempt to stretch the tired and tense muscles. This causes my pace to slow, but I quickly resume once I lower my arm. I glance again to my left, but this time my eyes are drawn to the short ledge that has been my companion over the most recent stretch of my run.

Lines appear regularly in the concrete shelf, marking where the concrete ‘mold’ stopped and was then resumed. However, other fine lines partner with these bold, darker ones. Cracks from years of weather abuse crawl across the dirty surface. A map of nowhere charted by Nature allows green sprouts of life to reach towards the blazing sun. Light reflects off scattered shards of glass from bottles long ago drained alongside some poor soul's sorrows.

My eyes look forward as my finish line approaches. My waving banner of welcome consists of a ragged plastic bag atop the pole that once supported a chain link fence. The same fence now rests in a heap on the ground, as if some giant hand peeled the metal from one corner. I charge forward, knowing that once I cross this line I can rest and breathe without the labor of pushing my muscles to their limits. My footfalls become heavy, and I swing my arms with more vigor than I have throughout my whole run. The fence disappears in an instant as I surge past, my sprint quickly slowing to a walk.

My heart pounds against my chest, and I place my hands behind my head while pacing on the forbidden side of the runway. Nothing stands between me and the paths of incoming and outgoing jets; the possibilities for adventures seem endless. Yet, I remain by my finish line, proud of myself for having run the whole distance. As my heart rate drops, I place my hand on the fence and let it support me for a moment. The world is quiet—nobody expects a young American girl to stand on the edge of the island this morning; so, I am alone.

Still, as I look across the runway to the island behind it, I am reminded that I am nowhere close to being alone. On the first hill, sit four houses,
all lack glass for windows or wood for doors. These buildings—shambled as they may seem—are people’s homes. Somebody looks forward to seeing the chipped concrete on the top right corner of the doorframe on his way home from work each night. The collapsing roof of the third house from the right might provide a skylight to young children at night. A dog barks in the distance—somebody’s pet, perhaps? Indeed, I am not alone.

I begin walking slowly back in the direction I just came, leaving the crumbling fence on its own once more. Retracing my invisible steps to the vertex of the arch, I sit down on the ledge and let my legs dangle over the side as I face the ocean. Orange and white striped markers, the size of a small car, stretch before me over the water to guide the path of incoming planes. At the bottom, where the water just brushes ever so slightly against the side, small sea creatures have left their marks. Barnacle shells reach out with short, jagged fingers in search of the moisture that once enveloped them. A hazy green line of algae tells the tale of the tide’s movement over the recent months.

I find a loose rock on my left, shift the stone to my right hand, and begin to doodle on the ledge beside me. Twists and turns appear underneath the rock tip as it shrinks away between my fingers. My feeble artistic attempts make me chuckle, and I stand. The crisp ocean breeze rushes past me as I hurl the rock out into the ocean’s depths. I aim for the third orange marker, but it barely makes it past the second. Shrugging, I brush my hands off and turn toward the runway.

An empty pack of cigarettes is caught in the barbed wire just to my right. A scantily clad woman looks out from its side, faded and scratched. Apparently, I am not the only one to break the rules and cross lines. I share this tip of the island with countless other ideas that need release. The barbed wire and razor wire, though a tangled mess, capture the remnants of other passing ponderers like me. Perhaps, amidst the serrated edges, a gentle memory is trapped.

I glance at my watch as I stretch my arms over my head; my hands provide momentary shade from the glaring sun. I should start heading back. Breakfast will soon be served at the hotel, and it’s imperative to be at all meals with the team. I start walking to my right, toward the mini-jungle where the window reveals the ground below. Again I choose my steps wisely, not wanting to ruin my trek home with a bloodied leg. I wriggle my way back around the side of the wall and trudge up the sloshy sand to the corner of the sidewalk. The men have gone but left a new layer of litter behind. I nudge a beer can with the toe of my shoe before breaking out in a jog back to the hotel.

More people are out and about now. Women meander through the ocean’s surf on my right, and they stare as I run by; I’m sure I look like a tourist. My hair swishes back and forth in time with my running feet, and I’m glad I pulled it back well this morning. I see ahead on my right our “private beach,” as my team likes to call it. We like to come down here in the evenings and tip the guard to let us swim around this section of the beach. It’s no different than the beach just a few yards down either way. Granted,
it is a little deeper and has some higher rocks to jump off, but the water is just the same. I find it funny that people will pay for seemingly trivial things such as this just to enjoy a luxury. I can’t complain though—I love coming down here with the team to swim in the evenings.

I nod my head to the security guard as I jog by; he in turn nods his head, unsmiling. Most of the men in Jamaica are respectful to older women, especially considering most of them never had a father figure. In Jamaica, older women—grandmothers in particular—usually raise the children. Most homes are broken, and hardly any have enough money to live comfortably. Because of this, nobody messes with grandma. I keep running, my breathing growing much more laborious. The heat of the day has already begun to bake my light skin, and I’m very much looking forward to a cold shower.

As I come to the end of the sidewalk, I see a large group of children down on the beach playing in the ocean. Their laughter cuts through the heat. They wade through knee-deep water, attempting to knock each other down. I smile. Amidst their troubled homes, these children can find entertainment in each other. Seeing them play makes me miss my childhood.

I turn to my left and head back through the backyards, picking up my pace so that I do not linger anywhere too long. I approach the black gate, sneak through it, and return to the sidewalk on the street. More cars are out now, and their noise drowns out the thud of my feet against the ground. My arms and legs feel as if they move entirely out of control. My wandering thoughts have distracted me from the exhaustion I know they must be feeling. The smell of the peppers hits me again for a few brief strides, and I breathe deep its tingle.

I round my last corner and am just able to make out the corner of the Gloriana’s sign. With the last bit of effort in me, I push my arms and legs to their maximum. Just like when I ran toward the fence by the runway, I surge forth over the cracked sidewalk, step over puddles, and never take my focus off the front door. When I reach my goal, I slow to a complete stop this time and bend over, keeping my head low. I cough a few times before standing up tall, smiling.

The doorman smiles back at me. “Good morning!” His thick Jamaican accent has become wonderfully familiar. “Good run this morning, miss?” he asks, ushering me in.

“Very good, yes!” I respond through a breathless grin. The hotel is just now waking up. A few other guests lie out by the pool, and some housekeeping women walk by with arms full of towels. I reach my room and take off my shoes before entering. For the morning, they have done well, enduring all types of terrain. I pause as I sit on the couch outside my room; my hands hang between my knees. Yes, it was definitely a good run and a great way to start my morning. Tomorrow I will go running again.
Tremble, little leaf
on a wind that threatens to tear you apart
surrounded by other limbs
laden with dying, deadening leaves
The world around you shaking,
the branch you cling to breaking
little leaf, do not falter; in sharp autumn
wind there is yet warmth
carried from shrinking sun, so far away
Others tremble, others fall—there
your sister is barely hanging on
twitching and tearing
fragile green skin browning, dying
You cannot help her, little leaf
Watch her crumble—watch her fall
away, past graying, rattling boughs
with others of her wayward kind
Her final flutter, this fragile sigh her last
kiss goodbye before alighting gently
on hardening ground already carpeted
with green and brown and gold pieces
She is covered, veiled from shrouded sun
you are helpless to stop her
just as you cannot twist
your own fate
The wind dies down in mist-choked dusk,
but you cannot hold on, little leaf
No more trembling—now flying, now floating
Now rest
now peace
Jessica and I had been best friends throughout high school. She was almost sane, calm, and occasionally anti-social. I was none of the above. Before I went off to college, we went on a road trip. We were all by ourselves in her mom’s car. We drove the three hours from Coaldale, Alberta, to Great Falls, Montana. Her dad had given her money for a hotel, and my mom had given me a Starbucks gift card. We made a playlist on my iPod. I added plenty of Three Dog Night and Brad Paisley, while Jess preferred Bruno Mars and Skillet.

It’s only an hour to the border. Jess and I, born and raised in small-town Alberta, had never been on a road trip with just the two of us. Her parents were a little worried about their only girl leaving the country with just her best friend. My parents had fewer reservations. They knew I wouldn’t do anything too stupid, and, if I did, Jess would bail me out.

When we pulled up to the window at the Canada-U.S. border, I was pretty passive, but Jess was nervous. She hasn’t really traveled like I have. We handed over passports and emphatically stated that we didn’t have drugs, alcohol, or bananas.

But the border guard was a lady, so we were doomed from the start. Lady guards are always distrustful and a little grumpy, like they’ve got something to prove. There are only two other types of border guards besides Grumpy-Lady: Young-Buzz-Cut-Guy and Happy-Older-Gentleman. Young-Buzz-Cut-Guy is nice enough. If you pull up with a big smile and speak calmly, they don’t startle and will let you through pretty easily. If you are an unusual case, Young-Buzz-Cut-Guy will usually defer to the final type of guard: Happy-Older-Gentleman. Happy-Older-Gentlemen are my favorite guards. They’ve got years worth of common sense and are just low-key in general. But for us, no Happy-Older-Gentlemen were in sight. We were stuck with Grumpy-Lady, who didn’t believe that we were actually driving our own car, despite our license, registration, and parental note. So she sent us inside to wait.

At this point, I was offended. Did I look like a drug dealer? Jess was all worried they were going to send us home. They couldn’t technically do that, but she didn’t believe me when I told her.
We sat there for twenty minutes, which is a ridiculously long time when you're waiting to start an adventure. Finally, we were called to the counter and a Happy-Older-Gentleman took a quick look at our info.

“Why are you here?”

“The lady at the window said that we had to prove car ownership.”

“Really? No, you ladies are fine. Have a great trip!”

“Thank you so much! We will! Have a wonderful day!” I gushed while Jess provided a background chime of thank-yous.

She drove. I took pictures, adjusted music volume, and ate Oreos. I called and booked the hotel before texting Jess’ mom to assure her that we were both still alive. We talked about nothing and giggled over a thousand inside jokes. It was everything you would expect of two best friends with a lot of sugar in their systems. We arrived in Great Falls around 11:00 a.m.

First order of business: lunch, followed by shopping. We went to Sonic. Jess had never been (it’s an American chain), and I was craving mozzarella sticks. After scarfing our food, we crossed the street to the mall. Everything is cheaper in the States. There’s a reason, and it makes sense, but I don’t know enough about it to explain it.

Jess and I love shopping together although we don’t look at all alike and have completely different styles. Jess is five foot six with a curvy bottom and a love for the pretty, adorable, cutesy styles. I’m six foot and top-heavy and fascinated with bold, dorky pieces. We push each other out of our comfort zones. I reminded her that the world is big and grand and ready to be conquered. There’s more to life than our small town and steady traditions. She reminds me that it doesn’t matter what others think or what they say . . . they are just people and people aren’t scary. Jess is just fine with saying no to helping with a project or spending the day at home doing absolutely nothing important, while I’m running around with my half-completed bucket list, doing everything at once. She’s my calm reason; I’m her half-baked schemer. We go well together.

We shop, maybe spend too much, and head back to the hotel to change before dinner. New high heeled booties, almost too short shorts, a dash of plaid—we were all dolled up, Montana style. She was curling her hair in the bathroom while I scrolled through the TripAdviser app on my iPod.

“What are you up for tonight, Jess? There’s Mexican, Italian, ooo . . . a really yummy sounding café . . . ”

“I saw an Applebee’s on our way up, let’s go there.”

Applebee’s.

Applebee’s?
On a road trip, adventuring solo, and she wanted to go to a generic family restaurant that you could find in Every. Single. State. Blah. I had put on eyeliner tonight. No way I was gonna waste an eyeliner-dressed-up-adventure night at Applebee’s.

“Uh . . . how about Greek? There’s a family-owned Greek restaurant that has five stars on TripAdviser.”

“I dunno, I’ve never been there before.”

That’s kinda the point. I didn’t tell her that though. That would be rude.

So we went to Applebee’s. However, on a Friday night in Montana, everybody and their horse are at Applebee’s. So, the parking lot, and the parking lot next to that, were crowded with pick-ups and SUVs.

Jess was pretty upset.

I was not.

“Well, that sucks. There’s no way we are going to grab dinner there. Hey, let’s just park the car and walk around downtown until we find somewhere else to eat. It’s only five.”

She agreed. And I tried to hide my glee.

We wandered around, window-shopping. The idea of “winging it” is not really a thing back home, and the lack of a plan was driving Jess nuts. I was rather enjoying it. We asked a man sitting outside of his leather goods shop where to find a fabulous place to eat. He recommended a bar and a diner.

We were legal . . . in Canada. So, we skipped the bar and walked three blocks to Sally’s Diner. I smiled when we walked in. It was gonna be good ol’ deep fried American cuisine tonight!

There were original Jukeboxes on every table. We wasted all of our quarters, and even got the tired waitress to bring us some more. I sang to every Neil Diamond song, and she hummed to “Achy Breaky Heart.” I ordered breaded veal and encouraged Jess to get the chicken-fried steak. She was in awe of it. You see, the Dutch, like Jess and most others in my community, eat meat and potatoes and boiled veggies. Deep fried beef is a whole new world. We both cleaned our plates and sat back, looking long and hard at the dessert we had ordered—lemon meringue and apple pie. Far too full to consider eating any more, we took it to go.

We meandered back to the car, happy and stuffed. Jess was ready to go mellow while I was hopelessly distracted. We watched movies back at the hotel, until I got hungry again, and I convinced her to go explore the Great Falls nightlife. Friday, midnight . . . I was ready to go a little crazy. Grabbing our jackets, we ran through the parking lot. It had thunder stormed. The pavement was black and glistening; I wanted to stop and look at it. Instead, I crashed into her passenger seat and flicked on her hazards.

“WARP SPEED ON!” I yelled.

She flicked it off and laughed. Her hazard button is huge and smack dab in the middle of her dash. It’s very difficult not to press. And it looks just like a super-speed button on the Millennium Falcon or something. So, Jess is very used to un-pushing that button.

We hit a drive-thru and drove down 10th Avenue, with all the windows down. We cranked the music and cruised past the quiet storefronts and flickering casinos while singing every word of the heartfelt lyrics.
“I’ve got de moves like Jagger! I’ve got de moves like Jagger!”
Yep. We had the dance moves to go with it. The passengers in the car that was stopped at the red light next to us wouldn’t even head bop along, so we sang louder.
“Don’t stop. BELIEEEEEEEVIN’!”
We had switched to 80’s rock. We crossed the bridge and U-turned into the Shell parking lot. By the time we hit the outskirts of town, the speakers were blaring Adele.
“I set fiiiire to the RAAAAIN.” We were laughing so hard. I tried to be melodramatic, and accidently smacked Jess in the face at the red light. There were tears in our eyes and our stomachs hurt by the time we got back to the glistening hotel parking lot. It was past two in the morning, and we felt wild and free and wonderfully exhausted.

The alarm blared at eight. I smacked it off while Jess covered her ears with a pillow. My iPod started ringing six minutes later. It took me a couple tries to shut it off. Jess didn’t even move until the phone rang with our wake-up call. I answered with a grunt while Jess rolled out of bed and mumbled on her way to the shower. I clicked the phone on the receiver and fell out of bed looking for my glasses. Mornings are hard.

It took me half as long to get dressed, but twice as long to wake up. Jess came out of her shower somewhat perky while I slowly brushed out my hair with a special kind of early morning dopiness.

We were packed and ready to go in half an hour. We checked out and grabbed a bite to eat at the continental breakfast. Jess showed me where the tea was, and I started to regain consciousness. Tea is good. Tea is very good.

Even though it was August, the air was chilly outside. I snagged the driver’s seat. Yesterday, the shopping and the movies and the calmer evening . . . that was Jess’ day. I got to plan Saturday. My first stop was the tourist center. I wanted to go see the Falls, and the road wasn’t on Google Maps or the GPS. The lady behind the counter was wearing a peach-colored suit, and she adjusted her glasses when she looked up at me. She outlined a map on the back of an ad for Montana Tires. Her directions were pretty clear. I asked her what was east of the Falls.

“Fort Benton is out there. You ladies might like it there. I think there’s a brochure here somewhere.”

I was ecstatic. I had been to Benton before. I could hardly remember it, but it sounded like fun.

Jess was on the phone with her mom, apologizing for not calling sooner. I glanced guiltily down at my cell. Unlike the seven texts we had sent Jess’ parents, my folks hadn’t heard from me since one bored text while we waited at the border. I waved goodbye to the tourist-center-lady and tossed my phone to Jess as we walked out the door.

“Can you let my Dad know we’re going to Benton?”
“Kalisse, where’s Benton?”
“About an hour past the Falls.”
“We’re driving there?”
“Yeah, I think so...if you're all right with that.”
“Sure...what exactly is in Benton?”
“Uhh, I remember a dog statue and a river.” I handed her the brochure as we climbed back in the car. “I dunno. What's it say?”
She read off the list of “Things To Do in Fort Benton” while I drove out of the city. It only took a few minutes to leave the industrial section. The highway was long and curving, slipping past field after field of grain and cattle. My phone buzzed in the cup holder. Jess flipped it open and read the text from my Dad.
“Cool. Have fun. Check out the Old Hotel if you get a chance.”
“Oh...yeah. Hotels are awesome. Thoughts, Jess?”
“Whatever is good.”
Jess leaned her head back against the headrest and closed her eyes. I didn't mind. Jessica doesn't do well with lack of sleep. She'd be a lot happier if she could catch a catnap on our way there. It was our understanding. Jess couldn't function without rest. I couldn't function without food. I reached into the back seat to our snack bag and grabbed a granola bar. We still had a whole cooler of food left, so I was set.

I followed the tourist-lady's directions for a few miles. They turned us down a wide gravel road. The bumps woke Jess up. She suspiciously glanced at our GPS, which showed us, rightly, in the middle of nowhere. The road narrowed, cutting across fields and almost flat prairie. No water falls in sight. Suddenly the ground sloped into a sharp corner. We were driving down the side of a steep valley, what we call a “coulee.” We meandered down past “Deer Crossing” signs and over Texas gates. The sharp, downhill turns quickly opened up into a sort-of parking area behind a huge, brick building and sketchy, steel fence. And there, in the middle of the prairie, was a quick river and a giant dam, with thousands and thousands of gallons of water pummeling over and down. I quickly parked the car and hopped out.

I loved stuff like this. Dams, bridges, unique buildings. They are the kind of things you can stop and just look at, learn about—dams especially. They are such a strong, dynamic combination of pure natural power and manmade architecture. I was leaning over the fence, feeling the faintest trace of water on my face. Jess was still behind me slowly making her way over. I just stared at the smooth cement and stone construction and the river spilling down the wide surface. When I looked over to Jess, I realized she wasn't grinning like me.

She didn't really care.

She was standing before something she had never seen before, and she didn't care. We were standing above a river thundering through the prairies, shadowed by this great stone sentinel that manages to contain floods...and she was standing with her hands in her pockets.

It was past two in the morning, and we felt wild and free and wonderfully exhausted.
I've seen dams before. I've seen bigger dams. I've seen prettier dams. I've seen dams that had lightshows built in. But . . . I'd never seen this one. And it was pretty awesome. And she didn't care.

She didn't get it. It was adventure for adventure's sake, seeing things because you can, living for those broken roads less traveled.

Oh.

The rest of the day followed much of the same pattern. Jess was tired and not really in the mood for exploring. When we hit Fort Benton, I took in the smooth river easing past a hundred-year-old hotel with a red brick front. She dug her sunglasses out of her purse. I investigated a teetering stack of classic mystery novels in a darling used bookstore, while she sat on a chair near the front cash register. I happily posed in front of a statue of a collie that I remembered from when I was six, and she just snapped the picture.

Finally, I sighed and forced a smile and suggested we drive home. Jess fell asleep in the passenger seat while I drove back up the winding highway.

I love Jess to bits. But, on that long road north, I realized I was different. I guess I have a touch of Wanderlust. It's a romantic term, a whimsical idea. But I don't know how else to explain it. I love going, and searching, and discovering, and getting a little lost.

I guess I just assumed everyone liked that kind of thing. But, this innate desire to go learn something new, or to hop in a car and drive for miles . . . it's not something everyone has. Some people say they hate routine. My first semester at college, I broke down and cried a few nights because I was so sick and tired of doing the same thing every day. During Thanksgiving break, my older sister and I decided we wanted to see the Smoky Mountains, so we drove until we found a city we liked, where we booked a hotel, just because we wanted to see more.

I'm not sure whether to call it Wanderlust. That seems cliché. It's just that, occasionally, or somewhat often, I am struck with a longing to have a brilliant adventure, just to see what I never have seen before. Maybe it's how I was raised, maybe it's something inside me, I don't know.

I remember looking over at Jess sleeping in the passenger seat, late that afternoon. I remember feeling hurt and a little confused. I was mad that she didn't want to adventure with me. But, then I looked over the smooth, silk highway and the endless clouds moving with my thoughts in the sky. I ran my palms along the steering wheel and smiled at the hundred miles in front of me. It didn't matter. I would always be able to explore, to challenge the world and come out with eyes wide open.

I pushed the hazard lights on and tapped the gas a little harder and laughed to myself.

“Warp speed ahead.”
She lay in the soft, damp grass.
Her hands ran through the green
Like hands through hair.
The sun heated up the pale skin
That peeped out from under
   her yellow sundress covered in limes.

Smoothed legs and little toes wiggled,
Reaching into the soil for
spare worms and nutrients,
Like her feet were roots of a tree.
Her foot roots were getting colder
   Creating gorges with the up-turned earth.

Here eyes were closed but
The light shone through her eyelids
And made dots in her mind’s vision.
Colors danced beneath her retina—
Ravishing, beautiful,
   In patterns of kaleidoscope lights.

A bird perched nearby.
She couldn’t tell where,
but she heard its chirping,
Ecstasy of breathing in this wondrous day.
The bird yelled to the world,
   “What a great day to live. What a great day to be.”

The crisp smell of natural dirt
And the light saltiness of sweat
Curled through the air
Only to be caught by her nose
And consumed in one deep breath.
   Perfumes interwoven to make pictures.

A sheen of salt lay on her lips
Letting her know that her body worked.
In her mouth, she could just taste
The strawberry from earlier.
The tart, dramatic flavor,
   Gently hiding any other tastes she may have at once experienced.

The shadow of the large tree
Crept over her stationary body.
In one single puff of wind,
The sweat that had once cooled her
Betrayed her to the chilled wind.
   Too soon the sun came to an end. Too soon the day closed its doors.
Five years old, he glared angrily at the neighbor kid, which led to the dispute: who played with which toys.

Outside on the swing set with G.I. Joe, Custer, and the dreaded Indian, each with their own steeds and stories.

He, his brother, and the neighbor argue about who should have Custer: the favorite. They use the age-old technique.

in the sweat on your elbow that
greases the springs that have your opponents,
Bobby, who’s fourteen, or Hank who has his license,
crushed like dried mud. When you stand from creaking wood,
you raise your arms in victory, and I see the tuft
of brown hair under your shoulder when I’ve got nothin’ below my eyelashes.

You are covered in dirt and invincible.
    When we go out driving, I’m thrown by the road-pits,
    and you’re unshaken, even though you’re only fifteen.

    You chug cheap beer. You can suck on cigarettes that scorch my throat.
I wonder at you, glory made out of mud. You can’t fall
so long as we live on this pond. So long as we live among
the mosquitoes that lust and the frogs that squat, arrogant.

Thomas, thirteen, slams your hand on the table, and
my empty A&W can tips over. You lock me in your
wiry arms, and I feel your tank-top on my back,
your knuckles grinding into my scalp, and I laugh,
and I’m glad you’re not driving off to become

    a moneymaker. Your ego is here,
in tackle-box treasures, with rain our only showers.
You make cracks. You give Thomas props because,
here, you can’t be bested. Still, you’re undefeated.
MEDINA
by Andrea Thomasson
(oil on wood panel)
HAKUŌKI

by Maria Hayden

(ink, pen, markers on paper)
THE STIRRING OF A DISTANT STAR

by Mikael Jury

(steel sculpture)
NO NAME
by Garret Nasrallah
(silver gelatin print)
WARMTH

by Laura Joy VanDalen

(wood print)
SOLIPSISM I
by Samara Thomas
(silver gelatin print)
LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD
by Grace Macmaster
(prisma color and ink)
INTO THE NIGHT, HEFLA
by Andrea Thomasson
(mixed media wall assemblage)
“Wanna head back in?” I turned and looked at Kent. The soft light outside the bar gave him a strange look, like an old photograph, washed out and fuzzy. The smoke from his cigarette, drifting in front of his face until it wandered aimlessly into the night only added to the effect, like he wasn’t really there in front of me, just an image of something that had been. After a moment his lip twitched and he dropped the glimmering butt from his mouth and down on the ground.

“Think I’ll smoke one more if it’s all the same to you,” he answered, and without waiting for a response he reached into his pack and starting lighting up again. I didn’t mind, and answered him only by taking my Skoal can out of my back pocket and dropping a small pinch in my lip. Kent looked at me and laughed, grinning.

“You still chewing that fruity stuff? I tell ya, man, that’s the girliest stuff you can do. Might as well go order an appletini.”

I smiled and told him where he could put it. I chewed green apple flavored tobacco, and Kent couldn’t let it go. Good natured about it though, just gave him a chance to make fun of. I never minded for my part, knowing I had a good sixty pounds on him and could knock his face in if he ever got to taking himself too seriously.

We stood there laughing for a minute when his face changed. He got real quiet, looking up at me over his smoke. “You see Brad in there tonight?”

“No, can’t say I did. He here?”

“Yea.”

“What of it?”

He stuttered for a moment, kicking at the ground. “It... It’s just last time you saw him you straight beat the crap outta him.”

“So? That was the last time I saw him. Don’t mean anything now.”

“It does, though. You made a fool of the man for nothing, Marty. That sticks with a man.”

I cocked my head a bit and looked at him funny. Kent had such an odd way of seeing things, always getting emotional when it wasn’t needed, like
last summer we was gonna go hunting and Mel got angry at me going for some reason, I don’t even remember what. Kent went and decided to cancel the trip cause he felt bad for her. Just the way his mind works. Fine most of the time, but could be a real pest when he got to his thoughts too much.

“You’ve just not been in enough fights, Kent. That’s just how it goes, get mad and fight it out, then everything’s better again. Done in a hundred times, it’s just fine. Hell, Brad’ll probably buy me a beer tonight, show there’s no hard feelings. Never are.”

He didn’t say anything for a bit, just sat stood there looking off into space, letting smoke drift out of his mouth. The smoke made his look seem eerily menacing now, whereas before it was just distant. He took a deep breath and turned to me again, breathing heavy, like something was weighing him down. “Marty, you say that, but you ever lost a fight? You ever been beat down and made to look a fool for nothing?”

“Not since I was young, grade school even.”

“Well, I’m just saying things is different when you lose is all.” He started like he was gonna say something else, but then threw his cigarette on the ground and turned to the door. “All right, I’m good. Let’s head back in. Next drink’s on me.”

I stepped to the door and pulled it open. The noise and violence of the bar flooded outside, hitting us in a wave of warm chaos. Friday nights are always the loudest. The folks who spend their weeknights at the Brass Penny would rather have their whisky in peace, and so instead the place fills up with people trying to shout their problems away.

Kent stepped up to the bar and waved his hand at Max to get us some drinks. “I’ll take a jager bomb and get Marty an appletini. Put ‘em both on my tab.”

I laughed and hit Kent on the shoulder. “Don’t listen to him, Max. I’ll take Maker’s on the rocks, same as usual.”

Max walked to the till then started making our drinks. Kent and I sat doing nothing for a minute, looking around the bar to see who was around. I still didn’t see Brad around, but most of the usual weekend crowd were milling about. It was only nine thirty and Erik and Beau were already trying to drink each other under the table. So far they were laughing, but they were sure to end up in a fight if someone didn’t beat them to it; seems like brothers can drink together but not get drunk together.

Kent was starting to talk to Allen, the shift manager at the mill, when Max showed up with our drinks. He put Kent’s shot and beer on the
counter. I was in the middle of asking where my drink was when he set a glass full of bright green alcohol in front of me all careful. “Here you go, darling.”

“Max, what the hell is this?”

Max looked at me and tried not to react, but could stop a smirk from cracking his lips. “It’s your appletini. I don’t know what your problem is. If you don’t want something, don’t order it.” Allen looked over and started laughing till he had to spit his beer back into the glass.

I glared at Max, standing behind the bar, mixing a drink with that smug look on his face. “I didn’t, Max. Kent did. Get me my whisky.”

“Oh I’ll get you your whisky, and even put it on the house. But first you gotta drink the drink I gave you. You don’t and I’ll cut you off.”

I’d drank enough already that I could probably hold off and call his bluff, but I decided to drink it anyway. I always liked apple flavor enough I knew I’d be just fine with the taste, and this would give me an excuse to give it a try without too much of my pride being shot. I took a sip off the top. It was damn good. I just sat still for a moment, pretending not to enjoy my drink.

I turned to join Allen and Kent. The three of us sat talking about work for a few minutes, complaining about our new shift crew.

“What I don’t get is why they got these youngins doing the jobs they got,” Allen was complaining. The new kids caused him the most trouble, being manager. “I don’t mind the age much, I mean hell, we all started when we was eighteen too, but we started with basics. Now they’re starting at jobs we got better men for and they just slowing us down. And if that ain’t enough, they still whine cause they gotta do real work.”

“Well, I’m just saying things is different when you lose is all.”

“Whatever happened being a man,” I wondered aloud, voice getting louder as I went on. “Most of these kids never had calluses on their hands, and they think they’ll be just fine in the mill? Most of them should have been gone the first week.”

Kent spoke up. “No work ethic at all.” He rubbed his finger around the lip of his drink, silent and thoughtful. “Want money, but don’t get you have to earn it. Little punks.”

“I bet I could take any of them in a fight,” I mused.

Allen laughed. “Probably all of them at once, even.”

Our conversation was interrupted by shouting across the bar. It was Erik and Beau. They were standing beside the pool table, sticks in hand, screaming at each other. Tonight it was over their game of 8-ball, but that didn’t mean much of anything. Brothers fight, just the way things go. I think one time they fought over what color the sign outside was—point being, they had excuses different than their reasons.

Kent was almost to them by the time I got out of my chair. He had grabbed Beau, the bigger of the two, under his left shoulder. Beau’s secret
was that he had a left hook that’d sneak up on you; most people missed that when they were trying to settle him down, but Kent knew. He pulled him back and stepped between them.

“What is wrong with the two of you tonight?”

Erik spoke. He had a mouthful of chew and his words spilled out top-heavy. “He scratched and just tryin’ to get away with it!” He lunged at his brother again. Someone had grabbed onto him too and he didn’t get nowhere.

“I’m playing fair as can be—you just can’t take that you’re losing again.”

“You shut the hell up!”

Kent put a hand on each of their chests. He did it to hold them back, but it was soft and reassuring, too, so they’d keep calm. “All right,” he spoke to them evenly, as if trying to calm an angry mutt. “Beau, you and I are gonna go outside and get you a ride. We’ll get Erik one once you’re gone. Let’s just not have any trouble.” The brothers weren’t too happy, but they listened to Kent anyway. He pulled Beau out of the bar by his shoulders. A few minutes later he came back and got Erik. Since things were slowed down for a minute, I stepped off into the bathroom to take a piss.

There comes a point in a night of drinking when your brain shuts down. I used to not be able to tell, but Kent taught me. We started drinking together back when we were about sixteen, climbing up on rooftops with a bottle of whatever we could steal from our houses, talking about how much we loved women and hated school. He could always tell when either of us started slipping and started pointing it out when I’d slip and I got the hang of it after a while.

When I worked on the Harris ranch, back in high school, there were a few times when the bull got out and we’d have to get in the barn fast as we could for fear of getting attacked. That’s how I used to feel when I knew I was drunk, like some beast was loose just looking for a chance to destroy; anymore it was more like throwing a raft in the river, drifting away careless. That’s where I was, standing at the urinal, watching my mind slide away lazy with my piss.

I walked back into the bar and found my seat. As I was sitting down, I felt someone graze my shoulder and I looked beside me; it was Brad, who I’d beat to nothing last time I saw him. “You trying to start something there, Brad?”

Brad pulled back and whimpered a bit. Kent put his hand on my shoulder and whispered in my ear, “Let him be, Marty. He ain’t done nothing to you.”

I laughed and gave Brad a nudge. “You’re fine man, I’m just playing. Sit down and have a drink.”

Brad sat down and ordered. When Max came back with Brad’s beer, he asked if he should take my half-gone appletini glass. Brad looked over and laughed. “Ain’t that a woman’s drink?”

I turned and flipped my stool to the ground. “What did you just say to me?”

Brad stuttered at me. “I—I was just kidding, man. Didn’t mean nothing.”

I moved in on him, but suddenly Kent was between the two of us. “Stop it, Marty. Not tonight. He wasn’t being serious—let it go.” I tried to move
past him, but he stepped into my path. “Marty. Don’t.” Kent didn’t usually stand in my way. I shoved him aside anyway, not too hard, but hard enough to let him know he best keep out. I stepped in on Brad. He was quivering and trying to explain.

As I cocked back my fist to take a swing, 170 pounds came flying into my ribs about as fast as it could. I slammed into the bar and onto the ground. On top of me was Kent, looking down at me, sad. He was pleading with his eyes for me to just let it go. Instead I landed a fist to his face and rolled him over.

I grew up seeing bar fights in movies and on the TV. Every time you see them on screen, rowdy country music starts playing and every buddy gets involved. A fight seems to be an excuse for good old-fashioned fun. Not in real life. As I lay there pounding my fist into my best friend, the music didn’t change. It kept playing the same sad song; Bruce Springsteen, I think, but the old stuff, stuff like my father would listen to. No one joined in or hollered. Everyone just stood in silence.

It wasn’t a long fight. I was bigger than him, and a lot more used to fighting. I beat him down pretty quick then stood back. The room was silent. Kent stood up and stared at me, waiting for something to happen. He looked a little angry, but mostly he just looked like something inside had broken. His face was covered in blood except a streak dripping down from the corner of each eye. He opened his mouth like he was gonna talk, but he couldn’t at first. He just looked like he didn’t have enough strength left to scrape it out. Finally he forced it. “Happy now?”

I just kept staring at him, not knowing what to say, confused and pissed. Kent talked again. “Alright, then. You win another one.”

My eyes dropped to the floor, his blood staining my white t-shirt as he walked away. I just stood there, nothing I could do, watching it soak in.
You Are Cordially Invited . . .
Professor Blythe’s behavior proved most invigorating . . . until given a drink
Conversation slurred among guests
    as he tripped over the vase
        in an ungracious manner losing all poise
            losing all the marigolds, spilled on the eggshell tile
                having groped his path through the splayed out
    beauties
Women and men alike swayed back to continue in rehearsed chat as
    Professor Blythe
    held fast to a railing near the curtains, crushed petals soaking his
        impeccable suit
And as the courteous action went, he left in little noise and with little help,
    through grand halls, his one drink forgotten, sincerely sober
The music gently swathes my body, its response to sway with each sound, fluidly, as the orb surrounds and spins naturally against the curvature of my waist. It revolves up and down, the hoop native to my body, maintaining accurate circumference in relativity to the twirl of my hips. I lift the spiraling sphere, fazing up at its gyration against my palms, hips still in motion. Gently gliding it south, I twist and whirl the hoop around, in circles, up again, down and around once more, body dancing and swirling, hoop soaring and twirling. Eyes closed, these natural motions proceed as I achieve oneness with the orb, mind at peace and soul made whole by the unity of this connection.
My aunt is not your typical psychic. She has her manor on Ballard Avenue with a maroon sign that says “Ruby Blessing’s Psychic Readings” engraved in gold. Now it has a lot of bird crap and overgrown brush congregating, but even when it looked nice, she didn’t have a good customer flow. Not locally, anyway—she’s made a bad name for herself. But she does phone appointments, too, and I guess that’s how she makes her money.

My family’s shut out Aunt Ruby pretty hard. She’s never mentioned around the house, but there’s this invisible, solid hatred for her that practically bumps into you when the topic of family comes up; she’s the only other member in the area. I’m not even crapping you—for the first thirteen years of my life I didn’t know if she was on my dad’s side or mom’s. Whenever I ask why we don’t see her, they say she doesn’t speak to us, but I think I always knew that was a load because of how nice her Christmas presents were, despite no card. I found out for sure when my mom’s coworker Gabby made a passing comment. They work at a welcome center over a big glen right off the highway. They hand out pamphlets and stuff, and we had stopped by real fast to deal with something.

“I don’t know when she’ll be back, Angie,” Gabby told me. Angie isn’t my name. “But if those super powers are genetic then maybe you know.” Her glossed lips gleamed in a big smile.

It took me a really long time to figure out she was talking about my aunt. Then I answered automatically, “My aunt doesn’t have any special powers, you know.”

Gabby clicked her tongue and said through an inhale, “Well, that’s not what I heard.” She put a pen to a clipboard like she was going to work more, but she went right back to talking to me. “Apparently she could predict everything when she and your mom were kids. How far your mother could make it in those jump-roping games down to the number, whom your mother’s first kiss would be. . . . The pancreatic cancer your grandmother died of? Three years in advance.” She breathed in. “Ruby got her diagnosis right on the day.”
I was skeptical. Gabby never seemed like the most reliable person, with her bracelets heavy with charms and high laugh like a bird call. “How do you know all that?” I asked, but the answer was obvious:

“Your mom told me.”

“Did she tell you why Aunt Ruby doesn’t talk to us?”

Gabby’s stare came at me. It was like headlights. “Oh, she’s not the one not talking to you, angel—your family shut her out.”

I gritted my teeth at being called that. “Well, why would they do that?”

Gabby didn’t give me a solid answer; I got a better one from Mrs. Evers, an old, wiry woman who’s looked the exact same my whole life. I knew better by this point than to ask Mom. But one time when I went over to Mrs. Evers’s house to return some bake-ware or something, and when asked she handled it with this ridiculous delicateness, as if I were one of those freaking thin-glass figurines. Her answer:

“Our parents invited her to your baptism. Directly after the service, she made a comment…”—she inhaled tersely—“which your parents didn’t like.”

“Was it about me?”

Another uncomfortable breath. “It was about you . . . angel. I don’t think it’s anything to worry about.”

I gritted my teeth here, too, at the condescension and also at getting called “angel,” which makes me want to go postal. I’m Angela, not a Christmas ornament.

“What was it about?” There was a violence in my voice that was pushing it. I could tell I’d gone too far when her head drew back ever so slightly, as if I had turned into someone completely different to her. She wouldn’t say another word about it. “Ask your parents.” That was it.

From the way the subject of Ruby was treated around the house, I knew that wasn’t an option. But I had a pretty good idea what this prediction had to do with and why everyone at church wouldn’t have appreciated it. I’m fiercely attached to my Christianity, so the implication that the promise of baptism might not take made the water in my head boil, like the bit of information just dropped in was a piece of metal, glowing red. So for what she said, or what I thought she said, I felt for her what my parents did.

Hatred, overflowing.

I usually don’t like to think of myself as a girl controlled by her feelings for boys, but I guess I am because it took one to get me over everything and break one of our family’s biggest rules. His nickname was Jumper, and that was pretty much the only thing about him I knew besides his job. The first time I saw him was at my church—some mousy twenty-something lady was getting hitched, and at first I figured he was some obscure relative of her bridegroom’s or something and that he wasn’t even from the area. But then I started noticing he worked at our mall’s Auntie Anne’s. His hair was straw, his eyes huge and green like leaves with the sun behind them, and he had a bit of a tummy though the rest of him wasn’t fat. To be totally honest I’ve
had scads of boyfriends. This guy definitely didn't match my type—didn't care about his looks enough. But thoughts of him followed me everywhere, like kids who look up to you whom you just can't get to bug off. Except here, I felt nothing but little.

I started going to the mall just to see him. I'd peruse stores just to make myself seem more normal, but I had all these rules, like I wouldn't buy a pretzel there more than once a week, and I wouldn't go to the mall three days in a row. I wasn't going to ask the lady from my church who he was, either—though she'd moved out to Kentucky post-wedding. While I scrutinizing some tops at Macy's, I would just have this feeling like everyone in the store was watching me. That was just my own shame, though. I'm not a boy-chaser, and I don't like being thought of that way. They come to me, instead. Like ants for a red stain of Kool-Aid.

But here I was, chasing—or stalking. I knew when his shifts ended and started. I knew the particular, focused way he interwove the dough, thin white plastic stretched over his hands. I knew the exact kind of water he would consistently bring into work. It was Aquafina, 16.9 ounces, which seemed so ethereal and perfect. I snatched all this information hard from the fabric of reality, picking it up in weird thin frays. I got them out of the corner of my eye as I passed by the restaurant or sat on a bench just a little ways away. I'd be pretending to be on the phone and watching.

There was one thing that stuck to my mind until it gained a kind of Biblical significance. He usually didn't work on Wednesdays. I was at the mall to pick up a birthday present for my friend Jillian, and I guess knowing I wasn't there just for him made me feel okay sitting at a bench diagonal from his shop. I was reading a Penny's catalog and was finding some good stuff, though I'm usually not a big fan of theirs. Between appraisals of their heels, I looked up and noticed him looking at something on the counter. Judging by his expression, kind of awe-struck and wondering, it was clear he'd seen some kind of cool bug, and I watched as he took a Styrofoam cup and carefully trapped it inside. He got from behind the counter a pamphlet to slide under, and tape to hold it all in place.

If I hadn't been in love with him, now I was. Someone I'd never talked to before. Mostly, though, I felt this fierce hunger and envy that he wasn't looking at me that way. I turned back to the catalog as if it could possibly spite him while my mind kept turning it over. For some reason I felt like he'd found a spider—one of those bright green, jumping ones with huge, adorable eyes. There was a picture of one in my biology textbook, and I mused on the image. And this was before I saw his name tag.

I'd bought pretzels from there when he was working, but he'd always been turned away, twisting dough, and I was too busy acting casual to try to get a good look. That was paramount—acting casual—so it was too bad I felt like vomiting now that he was the cashier, though that might've just been the chance sighting of another worker's tag, “Sweet T,” proof that they were just nicknames.
“Jumper.” That’s what his read. And the first thing I noticed about him was his freckles—one notch below coating him, practically like he was diseased—but I liked it. The second thing was his indifference.

“Hey, welcome to Auntie Anne’s. What can I get for you?”

I was almost kind of startled by the lack of life in his voice. It threw me, so I acted like I cared even less. “A cinnamon thing. I don’t want any dipping sauce.”

He turned slightly, no expression in particular. “I’m sorry. What did you want?”

For some reason, I practically wanted to slap him. “Just a cinnamon thing.”

“Do you mean a cinnamon pretzel?” He sounded like he was just waking up from a nap.

“Yes, a pretzel,” I told him. “I want a thing, singular, not sticks, plural. I don’t want any dipping sauce.” I knew that I was being dumb and ridiculous, and that just made me angrier.

I grew uncomfortable at the sight of his white rubber gloves as they slid open the glass. His skin looked soft. I wondered if he had a girlfriend. I wondered why my hair and looks were doing nothing to him, and that stung. All of this was twisted up in me like jagged wire, which got tighter and hotter as he handed me my change.

At the same time, he looked about as interested as a dead guy.

I looked at what he gave me. One of the nickels had that black grime on it—that melted-together pocket lint or I-don’t-know-what.

I held it up. “What is this?”

He was too taken aback to be smart and say “a nickel,” like I thought. “This nickel is filthy,” I said. “Gimme a different nickel.”

He vaguely shook his head. “I’m—I’m sorry. I can’t open the cash register by myself. I need to make another transaction.”

I took a breath and then slammed the nickel on the counter, flat under my fingers. And then I walked.

I left in a rage, and I jammed the pretzel and its stupid translucent paper into a garbage bin. It was worthless, and he was, too. In order to get to my car, I had to walk through the Bon-Ton. As I passed through its perfumes, jewelry display cases, and black dresses, I seethed. God, I was so ridiculous. This glamor around me, this beauty—that was my identity, and all of it was so meaningless and made of nothing. I tried heaping empowerment into my stride, but it didn’t do anything. My insides crumbled. I wanted him so badly, and there was nothing I could do because the closer I came to interacting with him, the angrier I became. I’m sure he

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hated me after that display. But I couldn’t erase the way he looked, his green kindness as he collected the spider into the cup, or the way I could not have him. Not all of the riches in this store would ever get me closer to him, and when I finally hit the glass doors and entered the heat of the setting sun, that was when I realized that there was nothing I wouldn’t do in order to get this feeling to stop.

I had to stop skirting around the mall. I had to stop asking the universe if this boy who didn’t know me would ever like me. The universe didn’t really know. I had been saving my trump card for years, now, and there was no reason to pretend it wasn’t there.

It’s been a few months since I’ve seen Ruby’s—she lives in kind of a weird area of town. Now she has a bunch of pink flamingos in her yard, although one’s head has been sliced clean off and can be seen under a thorn bush. Her house looks like a pile of crap. Ivy is making its ascent on the peeling salmon siding of the house. All of the bushes are overgrown, heaved up by dry mulch. My family’s well-off, and I’m not a snob or anything, but a little part of me is glad we don’t associate ourselves with this level of squalor.

There’s this raw rush churning up in me, and I push myself out of the timid, pathetic mentality of that mall forwards into clairvoyance and knowing. I trod on the thick grass like I’m trying to kill it, and I give two knocks and enter before an answer.

A ladybug flits in past me as soon as I come in. It attaches itself to a wall, and quickly I lose it in the mess. Ruby’s house is crammed full of junk. I see dusty portraits of long-dead relatives and bookshelves crammed with thrillers. I see sequined lamps and stacked action movies next to a wood-cased television. An old VHS of *Die Hard* is on top, its cardboard case aged and white-wrinkled. I’m the only girl I know who thinks *The Notebook* is a terrible movie, and I’ve abused my copy of *Casino Royale*—once I watched it three times in one day. So it’s nice to see someone shares my taste, because God knows my mother doesn’t.

There is nasty swing playing on a phonograph that’s practically hiding under an end table—“*No, you can’t go back to Constantinople,*” call a group of men trapped in muffling static. On another end table is a tall bottle of Jack Daniel’s Tennessee Whiskey—with just about fifteen percent of it left—and a green bottle of Jagermeiser, next to it, dwarfed like its sidekick. Also on the end table is an empty glass, and two crushed, fat cigars with black flakes sprinkling the glass ashtray they’re in. All of this is on top of a pink tablecloth that I can tell is now hard, molded solid in the circular shape of the table’s protrusion. This old, thick fabric is everywhere. There is only one clean surface—a larger table at the far end of the room with only a crystal ball on a gauzy dark violet fabric. I consider calling out, but I hear a cupboard slam and realize she must be in the next room. I walk up, and in the kitchen is my Aunt Ruby.

I guess. I only see the back of her—not that I’ve ever even seen a picture of her. Ruby’s in a maroon bathrobe and has hair curlers in. Her left hand
betrays her age with its wrinkles and its fat. It has one ring, well-done red nails, and a cigar with a classy label. The smoke gets in my eyes. Her right hand has a ladle, and she’s pouring batter onto a flat, square pan in small circles. She turns around, starts like I’m a rabid dog, and drops the ladle. It hits the edge of the counter, and, trying to stop it from going to the floor, she makes a grab for it and sends it flying over her shoulder.

“Holy ghosts,” she says. “I have a doorbell for a reason!” Then she bends over to pick up the ladle, and I take some paper towels to help clean up the batter. She isn’t like my mom at all. My mom is upright. She walks geometrically. My aunt moves as if her stumpy legs are precariously stopping the whole weight of her gourd-shaped body from crashing down. My mom wears make-up to look stately. My aunt, it seems, wears it to appear glamorous, except I think she fell asleep with it on, and it’s two in the afternoon. As I mop up I notice a fine layer of dust and thin hairs on the tile.

“And this is just what happens,” she mutters holding the ladle under the faucet. “I know you’re coming, I know you’re walking in at 2:12, and I know you’re going to scare me half to death, and still, it does nothing.” She whacks the thing against the sink’s edge to get the water off and then clears her throat. Her tone is really gruff and brisk. “Well, here you are. I would ask you how you are, but I already know, and I don’t see much point in wasting time with trivialities when we both know a family reunion’s not why you came at all. Now I’m going to finish my pancakes; you’ll wait in the parlor until I’m done—it’ll just be seven minutes—and then we’ll talk about him. Does that sound all right?” At the end, her voice dips a little with excitement. Suddenly, I’m wired. I sit down in the living room in some armchair that smells like Perfume Of The Ancients or something. I’m waiting and squirming like an idiot.

She sits down with syrup and four pancakes the size of sand dollars. She uses real stuff from Canada, not the synthesized crap from a clear bottle. She starts pouring it on generously in big glunks. “His name—” She pauses to look up. “You wanna know his name?”

I nod a lot.

“His name is Reese Floman. He is sixteen and will turn seventeen in June. He has three sisters and one brother. His mother stays at home, and his dad is away a lot working for NASA.”
“Whoa,” I breathe. The words drop color in my life. I wait for more. She slices and eats her pancakes, though. She’s a little more classy about it than I would expect, to be totally honest. Finally her thick-outlined eyes look back up at me again. “Now, I’m not even going to bother asking how much information you want because I know you want all of it, every detail, every stinkin’ infinitesimal scrap you can get your hands on.”

I can see that she knows—she knows about this fever and what’s more, she seems to support it. “Absolutely,” I say, and I leave no room for hesitating. “But I’m just going to tell you that you’re probably not going to like it. One might say you’re making a mistake.” I resent her telling that to me. “I don’t care.” “Well, I mean, I don’t think you are,” she says. “It’ll just be different than you imagine. Anyway—,” and she clears her throat, “—you’re not going to meet him until August. Now!” She gets up, goes to the kitchen, and keeps talking. “Now. You'll continue buying pretzels from him, ever so often, but you won’t say hi to him until August thirteenth, and that’s for no real reason other than your insides freezing up.”

That kinda pissed me off. “You don’t want iced tea?” “No, I don’t.” “Now, he’s gonna seem apathetic to you, like he doesn’t care, and that’s gonna get you on edge.” She comes back from the kitchen with a mug of iced tea for herself, and she lands back on her chair, which creaks. “The truth is, dear, he’s brain-dead at work, but that won’t make you any less of a pissy know-it-all in my opinion, and you’ll get so frustrated at him, you’ll say, ‘What’s the matter with you? Why aren’t you asking me out?’”

I snigger. That sounds like something I’d do. Although I think about what his coworkers will think, and then I get furious. “That will be when he takes you out for ice cream the next weekend,” she says. “That’s August eighteenth. You’ll be distracted because you’ll be on your period, and you’ll get a cone with a hole in it that leaks ice cream on your dress. But,” she says with a grin, “you won’t remember me predicting this.”

“Bet I will,” I say as a reflex. I bet she’s right, though. I hate how all of this is about me, though—about my rage issues and my blood. “What about him, though?” I ask. “What’s he thinking? Does he like me?”

“Sorry, I forgot. No not yet,” she says. “He is interested but not fond yet—you see, Reese is a person whose affections grow gradually. And it won’t be until November during a golf game with his brother and father when he realizes how much he likes you. Thoughts of you make him care less that he’s having an allergic reaction or something. Anyway, there’s bad news. Even though you’re more or less in a relationship, you’ve grown to hate him by this point because of his indifference, his ‘whatever’ attitude. You’ll break up with him over the phone.”

I stutter. That’s just the end of it? I don’t believe I’m that dumb. “But I know now that he’ll change his mind, so—”
“Doesn’t matter!” She lifts her hands to signal *What can you do?* “I’m sorry, darling. It won’t make a difference. You’re too angry about that point.”

I nod. I’m breathing hot a little, and I have half a mind to tell her that using so much syrup is freaking disgusting. That’s just so pathetic—being so shy around him and then so insecure that I have to dump him. And yet I can see it happening like it’s been blasted on the wall with a cruddy projector.

“Anyway, he’ll win you back over soon enough—”

My heart jumps up, and soon I’m leaning forward over the table.

“You’ll spend Christmas together; you’ll hate his sisters; they’ll think you’re a snob . . . . You’ll buy each other gifts the other will hate. He’ll get you a pair of angel earrings, darling, and you’ll get him a Nerf football—a green and orange one—and you’ll both pretend to be pleased, but only he will be fooled.

“You’re going to crack a tooth when ice skating.” I feel like she’s friggin’ reading some transcendental list. “You won’t want to go, doll, but his family will spring it on you when you’re not expecting it. Now, when you’re there, you’ll do that thing where you stand on the edge and hang on to the banister. But then he’ll fall. And he’s going to look so adorable you won’t be able to help yourself but go and skate. And then *whack!* She slams her palm on the table. “There ya go.”

I recoil a little and mutter, “Ugh.” I hate some of the things she’s telling me, but in all honesty I guess it’s what I came in for.

“You wanna keep going, right? I mean, I know you do, but—”

“Yes!” And I friggin’ hate that she knows.

“Your love for him will still have all these bouts of anger mixed in. You see,” she says, while gesturing with her fork, “he gives you less attention than your previous boyfriends have, even though in my opinion that’s because it’s love and not blind lust. Anyway, you get used to him—his tone of voice, every freckle, his warmth, innocence, caring nature, all of that, until it stops being a big deal and, when you look at him—,” she peers at me, “all you see is the praise he’s not showering you with, the adoration you can’t have—well, it drives you crazy! He has this great look, where his eyes the color of green grapes, they just shimmer at you, and you feel fantastic, but the space between those looks, it becomes agonizing.” She shrugs. “You hate that he wets the bed. He doesn’t tell you—his littlest sister Timberly does. You hate that he likes rom-coms. His breath isn’t bad, but you don’t like it. You don’t like the way his hands feel in yours. It’s this thing; it’s that thing; he just doesn’t seem enough, and you break up with him without even saying why.”

I want to snap, *Damn it!*, but I’m not gonna let her know how much she’s gotten under my skin. I just cross my arms and chew on the back of my lip and feel like I’m just a worthless heap, like everything I am is just time until a train wreck. I am such a friggin’ idiot.

I just hate that I can’t control the words she’s giving me. The whole reason I came into this house was to grab hold of my future, but it seems like my future’s around me, a hard grip. Worse, it’s all about *me*. All of these disasters have to do with me and my viciousness. I hate that I won’t be able to be content. But the more I think about me getting pissed off in the future, the more I just get pissed off about it now.
She finishes a long gulp of iced tea and then continues. “Anyway. Then you'll have a four-year period where you're very mad at him, drinking, partying, pining after him. . . . He doesn't try to win you back—with good cause—and you see other boys.”

“What other boys?”

“Well, let’s see. There’s Daniel, whom you’ll meet in your trigonometry class—now you’ll lose your virginity to him but break up with him not long after that . . . You’re mad at him too.”

“What am I so mad at all the time?” I snap. “These guys can’t be all bad—your story doesn’t make any sense.”

“My story wasn’t written by me, sweetheart.”

“It was written by someone who wasn’t checkin’ their frigging work,” I tell her, and whoever it is, I wanna tear them limb from limb. That’s it—I decide in this seat I’m gonna find a guy who’ll make me happy, one of substance, and stick with him, period. “C’mon, there’s other guys, right? Let’s hear ‘em.” I’m tired of listening to this crap.

“Well, there’s only one other worth mentioning,” she says, “and that’s Collin, but honestly, you only make out with him a few times. He has a motorcycle that stops working ten days after you two get together, and after that you just completely lose interest.”

I suck my mouth closed so my tongue’s pressing hard on the roof of it. I can tell she’s enjoying this. From the black glitter in her eyes, I can perceive this smug pleasure that she gets to know all of the things I can’t stop, every detail of my life that seems utterly destined to happen.

“Do you want to name all of your lovers during this period? Because you won’t remember their names later, so it just doesn’t seem fair—”

“No, you can skip it,” I snap.

“But mostly you’ll drink, on bridges, in tunnels, in your room at three a.m.,” she continues. “You might want to get familiar with that one over there, the Jägermeister.” She gestures. “It’s going to be your favorite.”

“I don’t drink,” I say bitingly.

“No one’s arguing your current sobriety Angela,” she says. She practically interrupts me. “Anyway, one time, at college, you’ll realize there’s no putting it off anymore. You’ll be sauced—liberally sauced—on two and a half beers and some of that elixir”—she gestures over again—“when you hop a bus to his college. It’s a four-hour trip. You demand he take you back. You puke on his rug. You’ll sleep on his couch on a bunch of newspaper. And he’s just now gotten over you, completely moved on.”

She reaches back behind her and manages to lay hold of a cigar box, and she fishes one out and fetches a tiny matchbox to go with it. She’s partly doing this for suspense, I suspect, but I’m still reeling in self-disgust too much to care what happens.

She lights. “Well, he takes you back, darling,” she says. “And then you get married.”

If I hadn’t been in love with him, now I was.
“Married?” I’m half-happy, half-outraged-past-my-scalp. “Are you serious? Just like that. We’re getting married.”

“Well people do it all the time, sweetie.” Her laugh is deep, and she takes her first drag. “Relax!” She blows out smoke. “Most of them don’t last long, you know.”

She looks me in a knowing way, like she’s just dying for me to ask if mine lasts more than nine days. I don’t take the bait, though, and ask, “How’s the wedding?” all dry.

“Ah. Well, it’s good as far as weddings go. You’re a little pissed his sisters are in your bridal party, and your friend Courtney can’t make it because her mother gets hit by an eighteen-wheeler, so that’s all very chaotic and stressful. But the food will be exquisite,” she promises. “Everything you could have hoped for! Cake! Coq au vin! And you manage to talk him out of asparagus, which you’ve gained some kind of fear of.”

That’s funky, ‘cause I have nothing against asparagus. “Vows—let’s hear ‘em.”

“Ah—Angela, to me you are the definition of beauty. You are an angel to me, more precious than anything on earth. You are my constant source of love, hope and joy. And while words can’t fully express everything you mean to me, with this ring I pledge to illustrate it to you for years and years to come. I vow to be by your side, a source of love as you are to me, and faithful always. I will love only you. I take you, Angela Bruce, to be my lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.” Then she sucks the cigar again.

Well, I think, it’s not terrible.

The very beginning was good, but then it took a sharp nosedive and didn’t look back. Could he get any more Hallmark? What is it about words like “angel” and “precious” that makes me feel like life is about as passionate as a roll of Charmin Ultra-Soft? Still, it seems really sincere, and on the whole, I’m satisfied with it. Lord knows it could be a hell of a lot worse. And if those words are meant coming from someone that pretty, then I guess I can be content down the road. Right now it all seems too unstable to process.

“You’ll cry,” she promises me.

I ponder at what she just told me. The pieces of my future she’s handed me have been scattered and sharp all around the edges. But finally I think I’m looking at them from an angle where they might make some kind of sense. My heart starts beating faster—for the first time not with dread, or from wondering what’s to come. Just at the thought that I might be getting something that will make a really good memory.

“I’m in love with him,” I say. “Aren’t I?”

She sighs smoke. It smells like mountains and moist dirt under roots. “My dear, the definition of love is something even I just know nothing about.” She gives it some thought, pensive through her next drag.

“You think he’s pretty,” she says. “Wait, there’s more . . .” She keeps smoking. In this silence I notice the record ended a long time ago. Finally, she exhales decisively. “Dear, I’m not going to tell you that you feel . . . safe,
exactly, with him, because that’s just not true. But you like him. You like him so much—I can promise you that. You think he’s wonderful, and the thought of him makes your heart beat harder.”

And just like that, I’m full. Just like that, the universe isn’t a battlefield. I can get what I want. And I feel like I can walk free. I can float.

But then I bite back my lip because I can’t deny how she said it—it was a regretful way. It was sad. And with the comment about marriages not lasting long, I feel all of it taken from me. The feeling’s gone, and I don’t even remember what it felt like.

“Now, darling.” Her large eyes point at me very directly again. Her voice is gentle as the smoke. “I have to ask you this before I go on . . . Do you really want me to continue? I mean . . . I know you do, but I just absolutely have to ask.”

This makes me furious. I’m guessing I will cheat on him, and the idea carries so much self-hatred that processing it’s like trying to hold a boulder. But I want to know. If I’m going to wreck my life, I just want to know about it.

But just before I say yes, I’m yanked back into thought with the notion that maybe if I end my chapter with Reese, there’s no more happiness afterwards. There’s some eerie sense I pick up from her stance that what she’s about to give me is the end—after this, there will be no more story to tell. And in this moment, leaving it a mystery doesn’t seem so bad.

But then I change my mind. I picture walking around campus with him, holding hands, all the while knowing that after our wedding, something is going to happen. There will be this minuscule fear following me like a bug, an eternal question, a constant reminder that everything I build could fall.

And I don’t think I want to live that way. Because then I’ll be exactly where I started—wondering where this boy could take me.

“Tell it to me.”

For the first time she’s not eager to share. She looks upwards, breathes in through her nose, and then says, “All right, well, you’re going to have a strained marriage for five years. You will be unable to conceive and suspect it is his fault. You will have no children—you’ll never have children.”

That hurts, but I’m intent on learning everything. I breathe in and nod.

She takes a huge draw from the cigar, her eyes, it would seem, slightly wet, and her hand shaking. She opens her mouth slowly, blows an O, and she says, “I am telling you all of this because you want to know every detail. You want to know every detail—am I right?”

There’s no a doubt inside of me. “And more,” I say, though I actually cringe when I hear it.

She clears her throat. “Well, what happens next is motor neurons in his brain start to die.” She blinks a lot before continuing. She’s not looking at me—she’s looking off where her cigar is pointing. “He will have difficulty balancing, and he will fall off his bike,” she says. “And he will trip one time going up the stairs. One time, you’ll see his arm twitch in the kitchen and feel like you’re looking at the face of death itself. Diagnosis of this disease usually takes some time, but because you already know what it is, your wild
insistence to the doctors speeds up the process . . . He will be diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig’s disease, May thirteenth, two thousand seventeen,” and then she clears her throat and plugs her mouth again with the cigar.

It sounds final the way she says it. Serious—like I’m standing before a hospital building. “How bad is it?” There’s a shuddering inside my chest. She takes her time answering, and I do some quick math.

“We’re not even going to be thirty.”

“I’m so sorry,” she says. “I’m so sorry I have to—”

“That’s a laugh,” I snap. “You’re not sorry. Part of you is glad you get to play queen. Part of you is happy burning up my life, so don’t even play otherwise.”

When I accuse her of this, some of the sadness really does vanish from her. It’s despicable. And then she continues in a more businesslike tone.

“It’s a neurodegenerative disease. Got that, sweetheart? It’s terminal. I don’t know how to tell you that, so I’m just telling you. You’re gonna watch him die.”

My very first reaction is that this concept swallows every other thought I have into numbness. Then, I am more confused than sad. I’m trying to figure this out because it doesn’t make sense. I can’t figure out how I caused this or how it’s my fault.

I’m still trying to figure out how I was supposed to fix it when my Aunt Ruby continues.

“It’s going to be a terrible time for you—I’m sorry you have to find out this way, but I hope that the more time I give you the longer you have to adjust to it. Not that you’re going to be very good at adjusting it based on everything,” she mutters while itching her nose. “Anyway. It’s uh . . .” She gestures some more. “There’s no cure for this, Angela—it’s essentially hopeless. What it—what it does is eat at the connections between your husband’s brain and the neurons that control the muscles—every muscle in his body. The doctor will explain all of this to you. There is a scale that you will have to use. It’s a system with points where he scores lower when he loses the ability to walk, and then he won’t be able to move his arms anymore, so he won’t be able to dress himself, and then saliva will be an issue, and he won’t be able to sleep. When he scores ‘helpless’ on one of these sheets, that’s . . . that’s what’s really going to be a hard time for you.”

She’s just pouring out the details now, and it’s too much for me to handle. I can feel myself shaking, and I know it’s visible. It’s not from anger, really. Right now it’s more from this rush of chaos that there’s no seeing through. I’m still not sad yet that I’m going to lose him, and I’m not mad at

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the world for taking him from me. I’m just scared. Everything she’s saying is so loud, and I’m scared.

“You, uh—you’ll rarely cry about this,” she says. “You’ll be too you. You’ll be too determined. You’ll be too mad. You’ll try all sorts of things. You’ll try walking in woods together, visiting lakes. You’ll try participating in those groups—the ALS groups, you know, where people get together and raise funds for cures and the hospital care, which by the way is about $50,000 a month by the end of it, and they talk about hope—oh don’t worry, you won’t go bankrupt. People will be generous, and there’s insurance—money’s not the issue here. You’ll quit the groups because when your husband needs tubes to eat and breathe the idea of hope will make you want to kill someone, so that won’t . . . that won’t last long. You’ll just lose hope in everything, in everyone, your job, your friends, your looks your life . . . Suddenly nothing will mean much.”

And now I’m mad—because I’m pretty sure she’s telling me all of this crap to overwhelm me on purpose. I feel like one of those bulls, and I’m seeing ruby-red, and she catches my eye—

“Now, Angela, I see what you’re doing, and you better not blame me for this. I’m so tired of everyone hating me for what I tell them.” She finally turns to me more directly again. “Now if you recall, you came in here out of your own free will because you wanted to know the future.”

“I know! I do!” I yell at her.

She takes a deep breath. The smoke continues on its trail, all Zen, and she says to me, “Well. All right. When the muscles in his lungs stop working, he’ll need a mask called a BiPAP to breathe. It stands for a bilevel . . . positive airway pressure, I believe. Six years after his diagnosis—”

“Six years?” It’s like the wind’s knocked out of me.

“—the mask won’t even be good anymore. He’ll have to make a choice. He can have what’s called a tracheotomy, and they’ll insert a tube into his throat to help his breathing, and that would carry on his life for indefinite but . . . costly amount of time. He can think, of course. But he can’t move at all—his muscles are all done forever.

“Ultimately, he’ll let you decide if he gets it. This . . . this will be stated while he can still talk, that is—he’ll tell it to the doctors, to the hospice worker just the sight of whom you’ll hate . . . and then at the end he’ll tell you again through blinking. That’s how the two of you’ll have to communicate at the end, through blinking . . .”

It looks like she’s about to shake her head and say she’s sorry again, but then she realizes it’s not worth anything. So she just goes on.

“He tries to tell you he loves you, that he was just happy he got to marry you and that he’s content with his life. Of course he told you that many times before, but there’s no communicating that anymore, and you’re too mad to take in what he’s saying.” She’s stopped looking at me again. She inhales from the cigar and breathes out what looks like a sheet of smoke.

“You will let him die June thirtieth,” she tells me. “You’re going to be determined not to, but before you know it you’ve decided it’s best to get over
with, and you’re fiddling with machinery before you can talk yourself out of it. And he goes out in peace, with your hands around his, and all you are thinking—,” she really looks like she is staring into another universe, “—all you are thinking is, I hate you, God. I hate you so much for putting me in this place.”

I listen to the stillness of the house now. It really is deathly quiet. But it doesn’t take long for a folding anger to start developing inside, getting tighter and smaller and tighter.

“Well—” I start. Then I start again, “Well, I think that’s dumb, because I have a choice. I always had a choice,” I say.

“Did you now?” she asks quietly.

“Yes, I did,” I insist.

“Oh, doll,” she says quietly. “If this ability let you change your future, do you really think I would be here?” A drag, then smoke, chuckled out. “In atrocious suburbia where my own sister won’t speak to me and no one visits for all the bad things I’ve told to them?”

I sniff. My heart is hammering because my entire future is on the line here. “Okay, but that doesn’t make any sense,” I say. “You’re a child. You see yourself growing up into this life. There are so many choices you could make to get to a happier place—”

“Ah. But—”

“There’s video chatting now. You could actually use your talent—maybe leave out some bad stuff—you could make thousands! You could get on the news!”

“Angela—”

“I could go to New York,” I whine. “Why don’t we pick something else? It doesn’t make sense.”

“This is what I wanted.” She explains it to me listlessly, as if it were a tax equation. “I knew I wouldn’t be happy, but it was still what I wanted to do. A solidly happy future was not in my heart. Maybe I hate myself or I was too busy being angry knowing this was going to happen to change it. Actually no,” she recalls, “I wasn’t going to change it, not for anyone. Not even for myself.” I notice her eyelids twitch—so slightly.

“This is what I wanted.” She explains it to me listlessly, as if it were a tax equation. “I knew I wouldn’t be happy, but it was still what I wanted to do. A solidly happy future was not in my heart. Maybe I hate myself or I was too busy being angry knowing this was going to happen to change it. Actually no,” she recalls, “I wasn’t going to change it, not for anyone. Not even for myself.” I notice her eyelids twitch—so slightly.

“No one’s arguing that we have the logical ability to choose,” she says, staring off as if examining the dead. “But in practice, it just doesn’t work out that way. There’s something about us, my dear. Not just you and me, but anyone. People say humans are rebellious, they will never be able to act just one way, but . . . even we can’t rebel against ourselves.” She takes a long drag, and releases it in puffs. “We are beings of anger,” she concludes, then adds, very quietly, “You were right—I enjoyed telling you terrible things. I always do.” She doesn’t look at me. “And then thinking about that just makes me angrier with myself and with life. And I want to tell the person coming in on Sunday that her teen daughter’s getting pregnant in a month,” she sighs, “and I will.”

I get it now—the frustration, the drinking, the getting with other boys—it’s not because there’s a single thing wrong with Reese Floman.
It’s because of what will be wrong with him. It’s because I know he won’t last but can’t seem to stop myself from wanting him, anyway. It’s because I came here to be in control, and now I feel like I’m losing my mind. And the wildest thing of it all—despite all of my fear about what’s to come—is there’s some small, unchangeable part of me that doesn’t actually want to escape it.

I can feel sadness coming—in crashes, like buffets of heavy waterfalls—but in a panic I block all of it with nothing but messy will. I’m not crying in front of her.

I think it over. If I stay with him, I’ll resent being with him. If I choose a different life, I’ll resent having to deny what I really want. This warning came like a schoolteacher’s, and there’s no way I’ll ever feel like it was for my benefit. So what does that leave me with? My hunger for Reese, I guess—and because I can’t change that . . . but I could if I wanted to. But I don’t really want to, do I?

The more I try to figure out if I have a choice, the more layers I create, and the confusion brings a sort of peace. Somehow I’m calm getting lost in it, and I’m content with that, so long as I don’t have to deal right now with everything she told me.

It’s coming, though. The seconds until we meet are diminishing.

I need to get out of here. I can’t seem to say the words, “Thank you,” so I get up with my knees shaking, my lungs feeling like they’ll only fill up halfway.

And then I just stand at the door like an idiot. I do this because if I go out, that brings me closer to meeting Reese. And I think about his freckles, and suddenly my heart’s sputtering and cracking, and I’m furious, and it feels like a bug lamp, and there’s nothing I want more than to electrocute myself right here and float away unburdened.

I see the ladybug again. It’s on the window of the door, and it doesn’t know how to get out.

I want to cry. I feel it already happening—she’s right. I can’t change any of it. It’s so claustrophobic, and I can’t stop myself from thinking of the way my husband will be lying in a sick-white bed for eight years running, a piece of furniture I made wedding vows to a long time ago. I think about our lives together, completely overtaken by unhappiness, wherein every single thing he does contains a reminder of how he will end, every movement of a muscle one less until the last. I see my bitterness emerge from me like a monster—made of hatred, made of stubbornness—larger and completely out of my control. And yet, even larger, fate—preventing anything on the earth from stopping this tiny disease that’s going to leave a monumental thirty-five years of my life barren, wretched, finished.

And then, from nowhere, I see him peering at the bug on the bottle. I know he’s won my heart forever, and that’s never going to change, and it’s gonna drive me freaking mad.

I feel the future coming. Already I feel like turning around and punching her, or painting the earth red. Maybe one day when this entire
crapfest is long-over, I’ll be able to accept everything that happened a little, or look back on Reese’s love and be content with it somehow. But not now. Absolutely not now. The world doesn’t deserve to exist if it’s doing this to me. And I don’t, either, if I am too useless to stop it. And no one does, in fact, if they’re going to stand by and say it’s my fault, or pity me, or—worst of all—tell me I’m handling it well when this all goes to pot.

The ladybug flies, and I turn, watching it. It goes directly to the table—a bit on the left side, and then it makes its way towards Ruby. I leer at her. And I stop myself from speaking, because what I want to say is so typical of a frustrated teen. I flinch. And then I say it all the same.

“I’m beginning to see why my parents don’t talk to you.”

As she takes a hearty drag, I see the ladybug right near her now. It’s just crawling, spinning, wandering.

“Oh, don’t I know it, angel,” she says back. “I told them they’d get a divorce.” Then she slams her hand down on the bug.
I am alone.

I am the business end of your father’s gun
When you’ve got nothing better to chew on
Than the words
She left you
With—
“You just don’t understand.”

I am the taste of cold steel, the Aftertaste
Of soft lips and Cherry Chapstick.

She didn’t talk much at first.
No, it was those whispering eyelashes,
Those baby-you’re-so-damn-beautiful blue
Eyes from across the room.
“My name is Natalie,” they said. “What’s yours?”

When Damien came onto her after prom
And all of his friends crashed her Party,
Wasn’t it Kane who helped you Thrash the lot of them?
He was your best friend,
And a field hand.

I am the Siren song of Oncoming traffic
When your brain hears Her track and hits “Repeat.”
I am “love you” before “it’s Over.”
I am “forever,” after the fact.
And every time she said “Good night” was a—
Lie.

She told you about her father
Because the only thing she knew so well as
The back of her hand
Was his.
She was the blade that would not bend
Before the wind.
But in your arms,
She was the broken reed.

You told her about your Mother,
Or what’s left of her After the Chemo,
She let you hide in her hair.
She gave you all the smiles she had
And her First time.
You counted Her freckles while she slept.
Fifty-seven.

I am your reflection in the water
From a hundred feet high.
Come a bit closer.

You were with her just that Morning,
Hiding your face in her Hair.

Maybe from that place on her back porch
You saw it coming through the wheat fields,
Plowing down the corn stalks,
And maybe that’s Why you retreated
To the Dandelion scent of her Summer Tresses.
She thought you were still worried about your Mom.

I am the small gun barrel circle that doesn’t touch your Cheek,
The empty space that will kill you
And leave you with the scent of Gunpowder on your Breath.

I am your—
Best Friend
And the night she slept with that—
That—
Damn jerk!
I am pretty sure you’d kill that little—
If
You thought it’d change
 Anything.
But I think you saw it coming with the Cigarettes.
And maybe you’ll let it go with your Mother.
I am sorry
That you can’t stop hearing the way she screamed for him.
Bit nine millimeters isn’t far enough
To leave me behind.
Rot rests under the stained glass
surface of a church filled with absent believers,
kneeling before an artificial dogwood
altar sprinkled with salt from tasteless tears.

Lazarus rises for the altar call:
“[I’m alive!] Can it be true?”
He never bought into the crucifixion horror stories.
“Jesus died. Happens to the best of us.
Only wish He could have taken me with Him.”
And he drags himself to church every Sunday morning,
his throat parched with its parasitic need for recompensing grape juice.

The pastor slumps against the pulpit’s
half-hearted offerings of stale, shattered crackers and plastic communion cups.
His words crawl like maggots from him
To infest and nest into
the unresurrected.
I wind it around my finger
to stay awake. The tiny thread

encircles my finger like a snake
around a helpless animal, constricting

until there is no room to breathe. My finger
turns purple, and I unravel the string.

I watch as the color
returns to my finger, the victim

of the venom-less snake.
I re-wrap the small piece

around my finger and hold.

“Stop that,” whispers my mother
in the quiet of our dimly lit church.

The pastor preaches on, and I disobey
my mother as I wrap the string around my finger.
IV

TRAPEZE ARTISTS
I remember the night I learned what flying was:
sixteen, riding barefoot in Johnny’s pickup
where daddy said I shouldn’t be
windows open and hair dancing
smoke pouring from the tailpipe and off
Johnny’s cigarette and Paul’s voice rushing
from the speaker, something about blackbirds, flight
and I was just another pastor’s daughter
knowing nothing of sky or sight —beaten
with stories of good men content to rely on invisible
gods who allow floodwaters, war, and Johnny’s sister to jump
off the bridge into the creek

We rode without speaking, radio filling empty spaces
but content in shared silences and cold October air
I just want to know what she felt I finally confessed and his tears fell
as I pulled myself out the window, swallowing bitter night
striking my skin. Faster I shouted and soon nothing
held me to the problems of skin and bone. I flew.
Later, I held Johnny’s hand and said I knew what she felt
when her feet left the safety we find in stone:
No fear, no falling, only freedom in her flight.
I was not old enough to remember when the Pecan tree was struck by lightning. I saw only the scar that became a home for termites.

Daddy talked of cutting it down. *Might crush the house one day. Might fall on the gas tanks and we’ll all go up in flame.*

It rotted away from the house, hidden from view unless you turned and looked at the crumbling side—saw past the harvest’s hearty disguise.

I was young enough to scratch at the scar, dig out the core and wait for the parasites to crawl away. *New growth just needs enough space.*

In time, edges curled inward, trying to protect themselves. They remain where I wait for them to expel rotten flesh or surrender to the fall.
Emy opened her eyes slowly. There was never a start, never a gasping, sweat-bathed moment when she sat up in bed, scared of the nightmares she never told anyone about. She glared at the green numbers that sneered “4:58” at her. Two minutes was not enough time to fall back to sleep, but her body didn’t want to get up just yet.

Drew snorted in his sleep, waking her further, and she groaned inwardly. She lifted the covers and rose jerkily from their mattress on the floor. She stepped around the multiple boxes of junk she had never unpacked in their four months of living in the cheap, mousy apartment, and went to the fridge, grimacing over the sticky feel of the tiles. Whoever had owned the place before had kept animals. But the place came with free utility and a view for just $250 a month, so Drew was not complaining.

The fridge light was too bright in the musty gloom. Emy reached in with her eyes half shut. Her tired, clumsy fingers knocked over the empty carton, and she grimaced.

“No orange juice this morning,” she told the clock in the stained, yellow microwave. “Again.”

She pulled a bag of wheat bagels from the top of the fridge instead, stumbling toward the toaster. She jammed uneven halves into the slots and punched the lever down. While the bagels toasted—probably toasted black—she trudged to the bathroom.

The light that illuminated her haggard, 19-year-old face had been white at some point, and might have even made the banana-lined walls of the tiny bathroom seem cheery, but it had grown as stained as everything else in the apartment. It made Emy’s sallow skin the color of urine. She didn’t smile at herself, knowing her reflection wouldn’t smile back, but instead focused on the little white rectangle of plastic resting on the edge of the sink—the only white in the bathroom. A little blue plus sign stared defiantly up at her, as if to dare her to deny it. There were two other tests like it hidden under unused tissue paper in the wastebasket; tests that told her what she had longed to hear her whole life.
Two tears ran down her cheeks before she could catch them.
Her prepaid cell phone sat on top of the toilet where she had left it the
night before. She snatched it and dialed eight numbers, jamming them as if
it was their fault she had to call her mother.
“Hello?”
“It’s me.”
“Emerald?” Suddenly, Iris Thompson sounded blocked, guarded.
“Yeah.”
“What’s ‘a matter? It’s…it’s after five in the morning—”
“I know, Mom. I had to call you. I’m pregnant.”
Silence.
“Well?”
“Have you talked to Bertha?”
“She’s probably asleep right now.”
“Well, so was I,” Iris Thompson retorted. “Call your sister. She’ll tell you
what to do with it.”
“Wha—”
Static.
Emy addressed the toilet. “Four months of nothing, no calls, no emails,
nothing, and she hangs up on me,” The toilet gaped innocently back up
at her. She swallowed, punching in the number she had not used in four
months but had no trouble remembering. As it rang, she turned and sat on
the edge of the toilet seat, her knees suddenly weak.
“What?” came the groggy answer.
“Hey, Betts. It’s…ah…Emy T.”
“Oh God,” she said. “You’re pregnant.”
“…How did you know?”
“You drop out of college, run off with your best friend’s boyfriend and
don’t contact me for almost five months. Why else would you be calling at
four in the morning?” Betts sighed. “Have you told the father?” She said it
like a cuss word.
“No.” She didn’t feel like adding not yet.
“…Mom?”
“She’s the one who told me to call you.”
“Right,” said Bett sarcastically.
“She said you’d know what to…do with it.”
“Right,” her sister repeated.
“I’m not aborting it, Betts.” Emy’s voice shook. “I don’t care what you
or Mom says. I’ve always wanted a baby, and now I…I’ve got one. I’m not
gonna kill—”
“Hey, hey, calm the crap down, Emy T. I’m not gonna tell you to abort
it, and Mom’s got some nerve if she thinks she can. I don’t know why she
would dump this on me. I’ve never had a kid.”
Emy took a deep breath. It was all too soon—the pregnancy, Mom,
Betts. “What…what do I do?”
“Tell Doug.”
“Drew.”
“I said Drew. He is your husband now, right?”
Emy ignored the question. “He’s not gonna like this. He’d tell me to get rid of it.”
“How do you know?”
She grimaced. “He said we wouldn’t have kids until we got married.”
“Yeah, and then he knocks you up. Seems like a real keeper. Listen, Emy T., if he tells you to ditch it, don’t listen to him. If he throws you out, come here.”
“But Mom said—”
“You know very well both of us stopped listening to Mom a long time ago.” Her voice was sour. “If he freaks, come here. Actually, even if he doesn’t freak, come here. I gotta see you, sis.” Bett’s voice caught, and Emy frowned. Emotion? From the hard shell of a sister she’d left four months ago?
“I’ll try.” Suddenly, Emy was scared again. “I’m not gonna kill it, Betts.”
“No, you’re not, baby.” Her sister’s voice was back to normal. “I gotta go—I gotta meeting today with the vice pres and I’m running on three hours of sleep.”
“Sorry,” Emy choked.
“No. Shut up and go tell your man what he’s done. I’ll see you in a bit, Lord willing.”

*Lord willing?* Emy swallowed. “All right.”

The line went dead, and Emy glared at the tiny bananas lining the wall, trying not to cry again. She stood slowly, dropping the test into the bathroom sink.

The burnt bagels were stale in her mouth, and she washed them down with metallic water. She remembered ready-made pancakes on Saturday morning with little clumps of flour that burst on the tongue. Betts never mastered the art of mixing, but she’d prided herself on her lumpy pancakes and watery syrup—all Mom ever made was Raisin Bran and skim milk.

Emy smiled.

“Blueberries? Where did you get blueberries?”
“I picked ‘em, fresh this morning,” Betts cackles. “From the JC down the road.”
Emy prods the squishy lumps that are sprinkled, bleeding blue, in her syrup, mixing with yellow streams of butter and chocolate sauce. Her mouth waters just looking at the delicious mess on her plate, but she is scared.

“Betts, did you take Mom’s wallet again?” A blueberry explodes under her fork’s tines.

Betts frowns. “She don’t use it for nothing,” she says rebelliously. “And she’s got plenty in there, so she won’t miss a few bills.”

Emy continues to stare at her breakfast, fear mixing with hunger. She jumps as Bett’s fist slams onto the kitchen table. “Dammit, Emy T., I worked hard for those pancakes, and you’re gonna eat them no matter what Mom says!”
“You swore,” Emy says quietly, obediently slicing into her soggy pancakes and holding a blue-and-gold-dripping piece to her mouth.

“I’m sixteen, I think I’m old enough to swear,” Betts sneers. “Mom swears all the time.”

“But you’re not Mom.”

Betts is quiet. “No,” she says after a moment. “I’m not.”

Emy was putting her hair up in a scrunchie when Drew finally rolled out of bed and plodded to the bathroom. Emy watched the door close in her tiny mirror, then surveyed her work uniform for any more stains than were already on it. The stark turquoise contrasted the white cuffs and collar of her waitress uniform, and her legs stuck out like tongue depressors from a mouth too big for them. “I hate my job,” Emy told the mirror. “But you love it. So smile.” The way the white apron hugged her midsection caught her eye, and she turned slightly to the side, placing a hand on her belly. “You’re going to work with me today,” she whispered. “I’ll love it if you do.”

The bathroom door slammed open. Emy jerked around.

Drew stood in the dim light of the bathroom, half-naked and clutching the little white rectangle Emy had forgotten to throw away. “When were you planning on telling me about this?”

Emy swallowed, her hands creeping back up to her stomach, as if to protect what was growing there. “This morning,” she croaked. “I’m not lying, I swear.”

“We talked about this. We weren’t gonna have a baby till we got enough money to get married.”

“IT WASN’T MY FAULT I GOT PREGNANT!” Emy wanted to reply. “I know, I’m sorry,” she said instead.

Drew sighed. “Well, come on. There’s a Clinic three blocks from here that opens early we can take you to and get it fixed before lunchtime. Call Mandy and give some excuse, and I’ll call Greg. I’ll have to pull out of my cigarette fund…” he muttered, turning back into the bathroom, tossing the test toward the trash can. “Great start to a Monday.”

Emy gaped at him. “No,” her mouth said before she could stop it.

Drew turned halfway back around, his silhouette suddenly larger in the small doorway. “What?”

Emy’s fingers shook. “I’m keeping this baby, Drew.” Her mouth was dry.

“I want this baby, and I’m keeping it.”

She couldn’t see his face, but the outline of his shoulders gave away his heavy breathing. This wasn’t like before—he wasn’t drunk this time. Emy’s teeth bit into her lip as she began to tremble, her fingers curling into a fist over her stomach.

“We can’t afford a baby, Em,” Drew finally said, gently, and Emy let her breath out.

“I know—” her throat closed, and she tried again “I know. But…I don’t know, Drew, maybe this baby would be good for us.” She licked her lips. “I
miss… I miss my family, Drew.” As she said it, she realized it was true. “I need someone, I don’t know, to be here for me when I get home from work.”

“Hey, now, that’s not fair,” Drew broke in, but Emy wouldn’t let him. She felt something growing in her chest that wanted to burst forth, and she didn’t want to stop it, not this time.

“No. I know you work hard and late nights, but it’s empty here, Drew.” She gestured around the apartment which even now tried to swallow her words into its damp walls. “I can’t do anything, I can’t concentrate, so I just sleep, and then you come home and some nights you just fall in bed, and sometimes you want to have sex or something, and…” She swallowed, blushing, “That’s always something I look forward to, but I need… more than that.”

Both of her hands were on her stomach, now. “We can have this baby. We can have a little boy, a little girl. And he or she will run around and smile and…and…” She smiled, and tears ran down her cheeks. “We can love each other again,” she finally choked out before closing her mouth with a pop.

Drew took in a large breath, held it for a few seconds, then let it out slowly. Then he turned all the way toward her, slowly closing the bathroom door behind him. “You don’t think I love you?” he asked softly.

“I know you do,” Emy lied. “It just… isn’t the same.”

“Not the same as when you left?” He sighed again, looking toward their unmade bed, then down toward his feet.

“We don’t tell each other ‘I love you’ anymore,” she whispered. “And you used to kiss me in the morning.”

“I know you do,” Emy lied. “It just… isn’t the same.”

“Nothing?” Emy’s voice broke. “This, this, right here, growing in my stomach… my child, your child… is nothing?”

He was close enough to reach out and put his hands on her shoulders, close enough to hug her and pull her into his chest, tell her he would love the child, that they could raise it. He was close enough that she could see the grey flecks in his otherwise dull brown eyes. Emy’s lower lip trembled.

“Right now, Emy, it is nothing,” he said with finality. “Right now, it’s barely a cluster of cells. It can’t think, it can’t feel. It’s nothing. And you need to understand that we don’t need it. You don’t need it, Em.” He reached out and pulled her trembling fingers away from her stomach, holding them loosely between them. “I still love you, babe,” he whispered.

Emy wanted to collapse onto him and let him hold her, like she did every time before. Every time he made a decision she didn’t agree with, he took her hands and told her he loved her. Every time, she submitted.

“No you don’t,” she whispered. “If you loved me, you wouldn’t want to hurt our baby.”

Drew’s fingers tightened on hers, and she winced. “If I loved you,” he repeated, and laughed. “If I loved you…”

I want this baby, and I’m keeping it.
He dropped her hands to frame her face with his, and she stared up into him, terrified. Slowly, he bent and put his mouth on hers, kissing her softly, then harder and harder, strangling her with his tongue, his hands going everywhere. Emy struggled, gasping, as he ripped a sleeve off her uniform and bit her shoulder so hard it drew blood. His grip was too strong, bruising the tender skin of her arms and neck as he held her against him, grunting every time one of her fingernails dug into his skin.

“Stop!” Emy screeched when she felt his hands on her legs, and she kicked frantically away from him. He let her escape and crawl toward the kitchen, covering herself in the dark because he had torn the top half of her uniform.

“If I loved you?” He said it like a question. “Baby, I’m the only one who loves you. But if you don’t do as I say, you won’t have anyone. And I say that thing doesn’t belong here.”

“Sex isn’t love,” Emy whimpered weakly.

“We’ve been over this, baby.” He wiped his lip with his thumb, where she’d bitten him. “What? Do you think I left Jessica for you because I thought you were smart?”

A sob broke from Emy’s throat and she stumbled toward the bathroom, locking the door behind her. There was a bruise on her neck and several bite marks all along her right shoulder, as well as aches in other places her ruined uniform did not show. She wasn’t going to work today.

“It’s okay, baby,” she whispered past her shaking voice, clutching her stomach. “We’re okay, we’re okay.”

“We’re okay,” Emy tells her first and only china doll, whom she clutches to her chest as she rocks back and forth at the foot of Bett’s bed. She can hear Mom and Betts arguing, but she doesn’t want to hear what they are saying. She knows they were saying nasty things. They always say nasty things. So she hugs Franny, who has lived in the bottom of her sock drawer for the last five years, since she’d grown too old for dolls. But tonight, Emy feels too young.

Their door slams open and Betts storms in, her hair—curled meticulously that morning for senior prom—fallen in broken ringlets all down her bare back and stained white dress. Betts tears the dress off and goes to her dresser, rifling through her clothes angrily, tossing this shirt and those shorts and some socks into a pile on the bed, next to Emy.

“What’s wrong?” Emy asks softly.

Betts sighs and leans against the dresser, pale and thin in her underwear, but Emy can see barely controlled rage in sister’s clenched fists and shaking shoulders.

“I’m sick of this place, Emy T.,” Betts spits at her dresser. “I can’t stay here anymore.”

Emy stomach drops. “You’re leaving?”

“I’m escaping. I’m eighteen, I can live my own life.” Betts goes back to throwing her clothes onto her bed, rifling through their shared closet for the suitcase with the broken zipper—the only one they have.
Emy bites her lip. “What did Mom do?” she whispers, half to herself. Betts whirls, her mouth wide open, ready to explain. At the sight of fourteen-year-old Emy curled on her bed around her doll, her eyes soften.

“Nothing,” she says, but Emy knows she lies. “Nothing you gotta be worried about, anyway.” Betts sighs again, glancing back toward her dresser.

Emy stares down into Franny’s glass eyes. “Mom wouldn’t like that you leave.”

Betts snorts. “No freaking way.”

“You know she likes you best,” Emy whimpers.

For a moment, Betts is silent. “What do you mean?”


“I don’t get it.”

“You’re not scared of her,” Emy clarifies softly. “Mom’s scared of a lot of things. She wishes she could be like you. That’s why she always says she hates you.”

She watches Betts’s black-painted toenails move about the clutter in the room and the bed bounces as Betts sits. She feels her sister’s hand in her hair, and she leans into her shoulder, squeezing her eyes shut. “You can’t leave me, Betts. I’m too scared of her.”

She feels something wet drip onto her forehead. Wrapping her arms around her older sister, she digs her face into Betts’s neck. She never asked why Betts cried, or why the suitcase with the broken zipper returned to its place in their closet.

“You don’t have to do this, Emy T.”

Emy turned from staring out the window at the house they had grown up in. Betts’s eyes were wide and serious, pleading, even if her voice did not.

“Yes, I do.” She unbuckled herself and opened the car door with a metallic squeeze.

“Maybe you should wait. I mean, it’s a lot to handle, what with Drew kicking you out—we can get some legal action on that, by the way—and you coming to my place...I mean, maybe you should get more settled.”

“I need to do this now, Betts.”

“Why?”

“She knows what it’s like. To be a mother. She could tell me if it’s worth it.”

Betts’s fingers curled on the steering wheel. “She was never a very good mother,” she said icily. “You know that.”

“She’s the only one I’ve got,” Emy snapped back, surprising herself, and Betts looked away. Emy frowned and asked in a softer tone, “Why do you hate her so much?”

Betts released the steering wheel. “I don’t hate her,” she mumbled. “I just don’t respect her as my mother. Every bad thing that’s happened to me happened because of her, and every good thing happened because I toughened up and stuck it out.” She looked up at Emy, her eyes hard. “She had reason to
treat me the way she did, what with how stubborn I was. But you, Emy . . . ,” her lips began to tremble, “. . . you didn’t deserve a mother like her.”

“Don’t say that. She only wanted us to be together.”

“She wanted us to be like her!” The words were a shout, and Emy glanced worriedly at the house, terrified Mom would hear from behind those moldy green shutters. “We disgusted her—me with my independence and you with your submissiveness. She wanted us to suffer; she wanted us to know why she—” Betts broke off abruptly.

“Know what?”

Bett’s eyebrows angled into a glare, but she was staring at the house. “To feel the kind of failure as daughters she felt as a mother.” She squeezed her eyes shut, taking a deep breath in and letting it out slowly. “You were the quiet one, the meek one. You did everything she told you to do. You were the perfect daughter to the worst mother.”

“She’s your mother, too,” Emy whispered, gripping her purse tightly, angrily. “She’s more my mother than she is yours,” Betts agreed thickly. “I’m more like her than you will ever be.” Suddenly, Betts leaned into the passenger seat, reaching out for her sister’s hand, grasping it tightly. “Don’t let her get to you. Don’t be like me,” she pleaded. Her moist eyes went to Emy’s stomach, covered loosely in a gray Beatles T-shirt. “Think of the baby. You are its mother, not Mom.”

Emy jerked her hand away. “I’ll be fine,” she said sharply. “Quit talking like I’m still a child.” Her eyes stung, but she was sick of crying. “I’m a grown woman who can make my own decisions. I don’t need you making them for me, or telling me how to make them!”

Bett’s stared up at her, surprised. “I wasn’t . . .”

“I get it,” Emy continued, not allowing her to finish. “I get it—you found Jesus, you changed, and we’re supposed to get along fine. Well, what about Mom, Betts? Where’s Mom in God’s plan? What? You can’t forgive her, so God can’t either?”

Betts pressed her lips together. “I know I’m being irrational. I know I ran away because of her, but if she really loves me, she’ll . . . she’ll tell me what to do.”

“She doesn’t love you. She can’t.”

Emy stepped up onto the curb and slammed the door, breathing hard. “Thanks for the ride,” she hissed.

The house seemed smaller, less imposing than it had in her childhood, when she’d seen it through the school bus windows and not wanted to get off. The green shutters were peeling and loose on murky windows. The brick walls Betts and Emy had whitewashed every summer were stained olive with mildew and crawling with spidery ivy. Spongy, rutted wooden steps complained as Emy stepped shakily onto the front porch, staring at the two hooks in the ceiling—all that was left of the old swing. The floorboards were splintering and had broken, gaping mouths opening to the black underbelly
of the porch, from which protruded green tongues of weeds and thistles. Numerous flowerpots—some shattered—were strewn about, their plants long since dried out. The useless black dirt spread unevenly in a thick layer of dust. Emy was appalled, recalling her mother’s feverish fear of disorder and disrepair.

The screen door squeaked familiarly when she opened it and knocked three times softly on the faded blue front door. She wanted to knock again, harder, if only because the sound was timid, scared. She wasn’t supposed to be scared.

One by one, the locks unlatched, and she could picture each one as she heard the metal scrape. Three for rapists, two for burglars, and one for the stupid ex-husband who thinks he’s got some right to you two just ‘cause the condom broke one too many times.

The door swung open, and Iris Thompson stared out, squinting in the light. “Emerald.”

“Mom.” The tornado of emotion that had ripped through Emy only moments before had disappeared, sucked into the black under the porch beneath her feet.

“Come in.”

The house was still and silent. The only lights were little dim night-lights plugged into any socket available, casting everything above knee height in murky shadow. Emy stepped around the coffee table that jutted out at the base of the stairs only because she’d done so a thousand times before. Her memory guided her to the couch against the north wall in the living room, which hadn’t moved since Emy’s sixth birthday.

“So, what’re you going to do with it?” Mrs. Thompson snapped, standing imposingly in front of Emy, a thin and frail wraith in the gloom.

“Drew told me to abort it.” Emy said, choosing not to be hurt by her mother’s businesslike speech.

“So, what’re you doing here?”

“He almost raped me after I said no.”

“Can’t blame the man for trying,” Mrs. Thompson muttered. “What about Bertha?”

“Betts agrees with me that I should keep it.”

“So what’re you doing here?”

Emy frowned, staring at the space behind her mother’s left shoulder, as she had done every time before when she was being chastised. “I wanted to see what you . . . thought.” It sounded lame in her ears. The silence swallowed the words up.

“Why should I have a say in it?” Mrs. Thompson began to pace, keeping her eyes trained on her daughter. Emy couldn’t see them, but she knew she was being analyzed, as she always had been.

“You’re my mother.”

“A mother you ran away from.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. But . . . you’re still my mother.”
“What makes a mother, Emerald?” The pacing stopped.
Emy smiled slightly, her hand creeping to her stomach. “Someone who sings lullabies to her baby girl, or reads McKinley during tea parties. Someone who throws a party after the baby’s first steps. Someone who dresses up their baby in frills and lace and talks silly baby-talk. Someone who goes to the park and plays in the grass and the sunshine.” She was grinning fully now. “Someone who says ‘I love you, ladybug’ every night after bedtime stories.”

Mrs. Thompson’s voice ate at the grin on Emy’s face. “Whose mother did that for you?”

“You didn’t do any of that.”

“Not much of a mother, then, am I?” Acid dripped from the words.

“I didn’t say that.” Emy felt all of the rainy nights under her mother’s heavy rebukes weighing down on her shoulders again.

“What are you saying, Emerald? Why are you here if you’re so big and smart now? All grown up, aren’t you? But you still need people to tell you what to do.”

Emy felt anger spark again. “I don’t need anyone. I came because I thought . . . as my mother, you would—”

“What, Emerald? Drown you in hugs and kisses and welcome my grandchild into a world that can’t afford it?” Mrs. Thompson was bent down, her face inches from Emy’s, spittle flying from her lips. “You came here because I’m your mother, and you thought I’d sympathize with you?”

Tears were building behind Emy’s eyes, but she held them down. I won’t let her see me cry.

“Well, it doesn’t matter.” Mrs. Thompson turned her back to Emy.

“You’re here for my advice, and that’s what you’ll get.”

I don’t want to hear your advice. I don’t want to be here. Why am I here?
Emy stared silently at her mother’s back.

“If there is one thing I learned as a mother,” Mrs. Thompson said, her voice strangely soft, “it’s this—kids are gambling chips. They might turn out alright, they might not. They might love you, they might not. You might love them, you might not. But either way . . .” she turned back around to face Emy, her voice hard again, “they’re still your problem. You still gotta deal with nine months of hormones and cravings and wondering why you had sex with a jerk—and then why did it twice more, again. You still gotta raise both kids after the jerk runs off, you still gotta pay for their clothes, pay for their food, pay for their education, or educate ‘em so they can pay for their own. You still gotta try and refrain from beating the hell out of them when they do stupid crap like run off without telling anyone!”

She raised a clenched fist, but Emy didn’t allow herself to flinch. Her mother went on. “You still gotta devote your life to theirs, and it’s all just a gamble.” All of a sudden, she sighed, turning slowly and sitting carefully on the couch next to her daughter, moaning softly as her old joints creaked. She reached for a cigarette from the box on the desk beside the couch, sticking it in her mouth without lighting it.
“I lucked out, I guess,” she exhaled. “I bet everythin’ on you girls. And what’d I get? The oldest is a damn nuisance.” Here, she smiled slightly, adding, “But, damn, if I had her guts . . . And the other runs off, blaming me, the one who did it all for her, and then comes back, expecting something in return.”

Emy was afraid that if she moved, the house would fall apart. She hardly dared to breathe, and was surprised she could still hear her mother’s soft words past the pounding in her ears. Emy’s knees were at perfect ninety-degree angles, her hands clasped neatly in her lap. She realized this was the way her mother had always told her to sit—properly, like a lady should. She’d never felt like much of a lady.

Emy breathed in. “You don’t have to say anything . . . more than what you’ve already said. If I’m such . . . such bad luck, then I don’t need to stay. You’re right. I don’t know why I’m here.” She waited another tense moment, then slowly pushed her palms against the musty couch cushion to stand.

Her mother’s fingers on her wrist made her freeze. She gasped, a small sound. Iris’s fingers were thin and cold, pressing against the rage rushing under Emy’s skin in a touch that seemed more fragile than the life growing in her womb.

She felt over twenty-two years of fending for the lives of two insubordinate children in that touch. Her mother had never touched her softly before. Never kissed her goodnight, never hugged her goodbye on the first day of school. She had never sung, never laughed, unless it was at something stupid Betts did. What Emy knew of her mother’s touch was the rough yanking of a brush through her hair, the swift and demanding knot of the shoestring lace that Emy could never master; the harsh scrubbing of her back and hair in the two-minute baths, the pinching of Emy’s tender six-year-old legs as Iris pulled bunched-up stockings to their proper place on her daughter’s hips.

Emy settled back into the couch, mesmerized by the feather-like feel of her mother’s fingers. She didn’t dare to move her hand, for fear she would lose it.

“I didn’t mean to get into this,” Iris whispered raggedly past the soggy cigarette. “I hadn’t seen you in so long, and then the pregnancy . . .”

Emy’s anger was completely gone. “Don’t worry about it,” she mumbled. “Emerald.”

“Yes.”

“Do you understand why you can’t keep this baby?”

Emy was silent. Then, “I think so.”

“It’s not because of me.” Iris took the cigarette from her mouth, kneading her eyes. “It’s because of this.” She gestured around the house with the cigarette. “After everything I’ve done to keep this together, it still fell apart. And now I have to live with it.”

They sat in silence. Iris’s fingers never left Emy’s wrist, and Emy never left those fingers. She stared at the house—what she could see of it—and saw memories in every shadowy corner. The memories were not good ones—even with Betts, there was always the underlying film of jealousy. The
house smelt of moldy tears, dusty fights put up on a shelf that should have
never existed. It had been built for a larger, happier family, children who
would play hide-and-seek in each secret closet instead of hide-and-cry.

“You’re too young to make this gamble,” Iris finally said.
“What, then?” Emy’s throat was choked with dust.
“Can we still fix this?”
Emy knew she wasn’t talking about the house.
“I can try,” she whispered.
Iris sighed. “I missed you, Emer . . . Emy.”

A thin wafer of triumph floated down to rest on the sluggish mix of
emotions in Emy’s chest.

“I still want the baby,” she said weakly, unsure of whether she still
meant it.

Iris’s fingers left Emy’s wrist. “It’s your decision. But believe me, if you
screw up, that baby won’t want you.”

Emy looked at her. “I always wanted you.”

Iris shifted uncomfortably, sticking the cigarette back in her
mouth. “Well. All right, then.”

“Mom, what’s the matter?”

Mrs. Thompson lifts her head and
stares through ratty, matted hair at her
youngest daughter. “Whose kid’re you?”
she mumbles.

Emy wrinkles her nose at the smell
of alcohol in her mother’s voice. “Mom,
this is the third night. You can’t keep
doing this.”

“I’s fired,” Mrs. Thompson gurgles.

Emy wraps her arms around her mother’s chest and drags her toward the front
door, which swings open easily because it had not been shut properly.

“No, you retired, remember?” Emy props Mrs. Thompson up on the couch,
biting her lip to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

“No more work...”

“It’s been taken care of, don’t worry. No more worrying, Mom, you’ll be taken
care of.”

Mrs. Thompson squints up at her daughter, drool sliding from one corner of
her slackened mouth. “You’s an angel, ‘Merald?”

“I was,” Emy snaps, suddenly wishing she had never put on the prestigious
white cap and gown. She rips the gown down the middle without bothering to
unzip it and tosses it away, following it with her cap and tangled tassel. “I stood
in front of the whole school, Mom. Principle Gregory handed me a pretty diploma
case and took my hand. There were cameras and people laughing. And all of my
other friends had their parents there to congratulate them.”
“Shhhhh, shhh.” Mrs. Thompson holds her hand up, spidery white in the dark. “Mommy’s sleeping, hon.”

“Yes, Mommy’s sleeping,” Emy replies past clenched lips. “Mommy’s always sleeping.”

Mrs. Thompson sat up a little, her eyes suddenly going wide. “They don’t know,” she moaned. “My babies, they don’t know. Why won’t they understand?”

Emy turned and stepped slowly away from her mother and trudged up the stairs, leaving the woman babbling into the empty darkness.

“Emy.”

She raised her head from her pillow, opening her eyes tiredly. “Betts,” she mumbled from sleepy lips.

“You don’t look so hot, baby.”

Emy grinned slightly. “I don’t feel so hot.”

“You heard?”

The pain swam back into her gut, and the grin dropped. Emy closed her eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Emy.” Bett’s voice was low.

“I’m not.” The lie tasted foul, and Emy tried not to remember the gloopy hospital food she’d tried to force down hours before.

“I don’t understand,” Betts whispered after a few minutes of silence.

“You were so sure…”

“Betts.” The name dropped from her lips like stone. “If you came here to say ‘I told you so,’ I never want to speak to you again.”

“No,” Betts said softly, sincerely. “This just…it twists me up inside, to see you like this.”

Emy turned her face away. “I don’t want to talk about it,” she mumbled. One of her fingers twitched against her side, and she curled it into a weak fist.

“She had no right,” Betts said bitterly. “She did this to you.”

“I chose this,” Emy said as firmly as she could. “It’s my fault.”

“No. She never told you, did she?”

“She told me how hard it was, raising us. Her sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice? Is that what she calls it?” Bett’s chair creaked as she stood, and Emy watched her shadow on the wall. “I’m so sorry, Emy, I thought she was gonna tell you.”

Emy looked back toward her sister. “Tell me what?”

“She got pregnant when she was eighteen, but she couldn’t keep the baby. She had an abortion, too, before either one of us.”

Emy’s eyes flew open. She stared numbly out the window.

“I found out the night of senior prom. I wanted to leave…”

“I remember.”

“I wanted to tell you, too.” Bett’s shadow wafted to the far wall, where it leaned against the corner. “But it wasn’t my secret to tell. She never wanted either one of us to know.”

“Get out.”
Bett’s face lifted, turning toward her sister. “What?”

“Get out, Betts.”

Betts was still, her shadow uncertain. Then, hesitantly, she stepped toward the door. Emy waited for the light pat on the head, the quick kiss on her ear that the old Betts would have given, but the shadow on the wall blended into the light from the hall and did not return.

“Oh, my poor baby,” Emy whimpered into her pillow. Her hand crept down to rest on her empty belly. She didn’t move her middle because she knew the pain would return, the striking, spreading pain that had awoken during the procedure. She’d wondered if it was normal, but the panic in the plastic eyes of the doctor had told her otherwise. She’d only started to scream when the first tiny limb was pulled hurriedly out. The doctor was young, inexperienced, and his hands were shaking. For a moment, their eyes met, but Emy couldn’t understand what he was trying to tell her. She wailed into the ceiling and broke just as two nurses rushed into the room.

Emy breaches the surface of her consciousness for only a few moments. “It would have been her only pregnancy,” a white-robed mannequin says over her still form, cocooned in the artificial blue of the hospital sheets. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Thompson.”

“Don’t be.” Iris Thompson’s voice is flat. Emy opens her mouth, gasping for air, but her searching eyes dim and darken.

“She wanted me to know how hard it was,” Emy told her IV chord. She was tired of thinking. She just wanted to sleep. She only wanted me to understand.

A single cloud crawled behind the yellow-white blinds that barred her window. She watched it move sluggishly across the sky until it disappeared.
I remember cobblestones and broken tombs,
Verses, painted in red on white walls,
And the life of the Moravians—
A German sect who settled east Pennsylvania
And Salem, North Carolina.
They divided men from women,
Each walked their own path through the woods,
Then brought them together, via prayer and lots.
I can only wonder—
What would it be like to be told
By an elder, a follower of God,
“That man—John, the carpenter—
Is to be your husband. It is God’s will.”
What if you knew John kept contraband whisky,
In the bottom of his trunk—
Or, what if you could not imagine
Being embraced by a man you scarcely knew?
Could you say—“No”—
Or would the wedding night be a crucifixion,
Death so that others might live,
And the Moravian settlement continue to thrive
In the middle of the wilderness?
THE RISING SUN

by Maria Hayden

(ink, pen, markers on paper)
THE PRESENCE OF THE MISSING

by Drew Dempsey

(silver gelatin print)
UNTITLED

by Sarah Jernigan

(digital photo)
UNTITLED
by Laura Joy VanDalen
(wood print)
DISTANT VOYAGER
by Mikael Jury
(woodcut print)
THE PRESENCE OF THE MISSING III
by Drew Dempsey
(silver gelatin print)
THE PRESENCE OF THE MISSING II

by Drew Dempsey

(silver gelatin print)
UNTITLED
by Molly Manning
(manipulated silver gelatin print)
In a white-snowed forest
the mother holds the daughter:
all is calm.

The path darkens,
sky blurry.

The cold trees shiver,
leaves left buried.

As the two travel, the girl
plays on the snow,
turning up her face, smiles
in a laconic rapture.

The fences and the snowmen
in the yards keep still.

A grandpa wearing an old coat
gets up from the log.

Quickly
they hurry,
they hurry through
winter’s lifeless body.
“Y
ou put one foot on that headstone and you’ll be sucked into the
grave!” my grandma hissed at me. I became a crouched statue,
paralyzed by her frightful prophecy. I merely wanted to play a game, and the
flat gravestone in front of me looked quite accommodating. My extended
foot trembled, and I swiveled my eyes toward her. She couldn’t possibly be
lying. Old people didn’t lie. After a frozen moment, she grabbed my arm and
didn’t let go as we finished our grave-walk in the old Iowan cemetery where
my great-grandmother was buried. Every step I took was one of fear—one
slip of the foot and some corpse was going to haul me to his lair.

Images of ominous skeletons hiding behind headstones or just beneath
the grass started haunting my subconscious. Every time my family went
to Iowa, I could think of nothing else—we only went to the farm for three
reasons: summer vacation, family reunions, or funerals. Every time we
visited, Grandma somehow managed to tow us along to various nursing
homes and cemeteries where our most lagging relatives lived, so Death
seemed to follow me everywhere.

It wasn’t until I found out that cemetery, from the Greek root, meant
“sleeping place” or “dormitory” that my grandma’s warning morphed into
something less terrifying and more satisfactory to my youthful sensibilities.
Stepping on those stones was like knocking on the dead’s door; a skeletal
hand would not reach up and grab my ankle, but rather tap my foot kindly
and invite me to tea.

I learned something about Death from Iowa: The dead never really
leave, just like sleeping doesn’t stop tomorrow from coming.

My parents grew up in Iowa, and my brother, sister, and I were each
born somewhere amidst the corn and livestock. Mom and Dad moved us
away as soon as they were through with college, though, and our Iowan
natures were limited to short visits. My brother, sister, and I found in
the farm liberation—as soon as we pulled into the gravel driveway of my
grandparents’ wood-paneled farmhouse, we’d run across the golden field to
where the workshop, old barn, and silos were. Our first order of business was
finding the kittens.

Somehow, there was a new litter of kittens every time we were there,
their eyes not yet open, their bodies mushy balls of fluff. Yet the cat
population on the farm never grew. The mother cat was the only one to stay
steady and the only one we ever recognized. She had half a tail and one blue
eye. Most of her kittens had six or seven toes on each foot and would vanish
before we returned to Iowa on our next trip. Even after we took the time
to name them and everything, Grandma always told us that they ran away
from home, but I wondered why they’d ever want to do that. The mama-cat
wasn’t too upset about the loss of her children, though. She just had more.

Great-grandma Hougland passed away in her sleep. It was the first
funeral I remember.

After kitten scouting, we’d run to
the old barn-skeleton. It was swallowed
by fire before I was born, but it still stood
charred and spindly on the horizon, its
innards choked with debris made up of
old tools, farming equipment, and jars.
When we were really little, we weren’t
allowed to explore it due to the danger
of it collapsing on us, but we shrugged
that rule off like a wool sweater in
summertime. Broken glass of all colors
littered the floor, and rusty metal made
up the walls. There were holes in the
blackened roof so that sunlight streamed
through in little rivers of brightness. Dust floated in the air lazily—I guess it
was this and tricks of the light that allowed me to see ghosts flitting into the
shadows. Occasionally one of the kittens would make its way in; we’d hear
its little “meew” and answer back.

Years ago, Grandpa said he was going to tear down the “ole pile of
rubbish,” but to this day he hasn’t.

Great-grandma Tichenor, Great-nana Ordleheid, and Great-aunt
Elizabeth spent nice chunks of time in nursing homes. They’re in heaven now.

By the time night fell, us kids were in the habit of gearing up with our
Betty Crocker jars to catch lightning bugs. Within thirty minutes, the three
of us would have blinking jars bursting with insects. We poked holes in the
lids to give the creatures air to breathe and then set them by our bedsides
when we went to sleep. By morning all but one or two would be lying at the

It was in those moments
I felt the weight of the
years and the presence of
the past. I never doubted
that there was something
more to the world than
just living and dying.

__________________
Harvest will be here tomorrow.
bottom of the jar, stiffened into rows like soldiers. The few living crawled
over the dead sluggishly.

The sight of this massacre didn't really faze us. We knew that the next
night, the next summer, and for the rest of time we would be able to go
outside before bed and kidnap the creatures into our little jars, handcrafting
our very own night lights.

Mom cried at Great-grandpa Arnold’s funeral. So did I.

My most poignant memories, though, are the harvest parties. When
harvest came, as it did so faithfully every year, we gathered more corn than
I knew existed, and we celebrated. The day of the party, grandpa would send
us out into the endless rows of sweet corn to husk until our hands could
husk no more. The solitary job always sent chills down my spine—being
alone in the tall stalks, the wind whispering through their reaching hands,
was unlike anything I could experience at home. It was in those moments
I felt the weight of the years and the presence of the past. I never doubted
that there was something more to the world than just living and dying.

At the end of the day, we’d see Grandpa dancing over giant pots of
boiling corn like some forgotten god. Salt and butter sat serenely on the
picnic tables, and bluegrass played in the background. We’d eat corn like the
locusts were coming.

We don’t forget the people who have passed; they don’t forget us either.

The farm hasn’t changed one bit. My family doesn’t frequent the fields
anymore, but when we return, the constancy is obvious. No matter how
many seasons pass and years dwindle away, the continuous whisper of—
what is it? life?—never quiets.

You see, farms are a palpable heartbeat. Simplicity reigns supreme when
the air is not muddied by incessant beeps and bustles of technology; there
aren’t many places where we can inhale breaths of spirit and hold hands with
clarity. In the country, Death doesn’t kill the living because everyone is a
friend; we give ghosts our memory because that is all they ask for. And they
leave us reminders: in the dusty halls of old buildings, in the golden, swaying
grass of Iowan fields, in the whispering wind chimes and dancing rocking
chairs; and, of course, there will always be the hand reaching up from the
grave, asking, “Come have tea with me? It won’t take long, and harvest will
be here tomorrow.”
We went into the neighborhood at night
in the winter before you took my hand.
I sank my sneakers into hardened dog prints
on the concrete. You leapt
across a spring that pressed with calm persistence
through Laurel Street, a slowly growing shadow.
With a dancer’s eager strides
you took the hill to the corner where an old bent
sentinel laid his light upon you.

I stood back as amber rays sifted
through your dark hair like saplings
growing out from the earth—blooming.
And then the light assembled
on your shoulders. I stared, transfixed
by the way your scarf held your neck.

You turned, face rendered impressionistic
by shadows, and cocked your head—questioning.
Suddenly conscious of my eyes,
I hurried out of the dark to walk
beside you again.
It starts with friction producing warmth. The glue begins to melt and the shoe softens, causing difficulty with the relevé and pain in the foot.

Iowa Dance Theatre hired a guest artist to play Cinderella. The first part of the role is performed with bare feet. In rehearsal, she always had sterile medical tape wrapped around her toes and knuckles, to prevent bunions.

The feet sweat and accelerate the breakdown process, creating the ideal atmosphere for blisters to form and break underneath the gel padding.

“Dancers come to me from all over,” he said. Ill fitting shoes are the number one cause of injury. “My wife has had multiple surgeries on both feet. I want to prevent that from happening to anyone else.”

If the dancer has an especially arched foot, the shank will diminish more quickly; the need for extra support comes with flexibility.

Russia produces the best ballerinas, strictly training them from a young age, but
those girls are often the first to suffer medical problems from forcing their feet to turn out beyond what is natural for their bodies.

*Worn until softness prevents sustained balance on the toes. Classified as “dead,” they collect in piles or are discarded.*

I used to dance en pointe, but after eight years and thirty-one pairs of demolished shoes, I decided to only dance flat and admire the beauty from a personal understanding of the pain.

*Starting afresh, with hard box and stiff shank, the process is repeated. New shoes, but the previous scars and pain endure.*

It is common practice to re-glue the box, but this only temporarily holds up. Most shoes can withstand 12 hours of wear, with proper care.

*They weren’t made to last forever.*
DEVIATION OF NATURE
OUR EMILY

BY COURTNEY RODGERS

Pretty as a Rose,
More tenacious than a weed,
Our Emily held up that damned army,
With looks and charm alone.

We,
The Republic of Texas,
Have our girl to thank.

Here, our brothers fought and died,
And here,
Our Emily distracted El General,
For eighteen minutes,
And he lost the war.
He done died.

God bless Our Emily.

We gave Emily
This old hotel.
Ain’t it pretty?
Them gargoyles sure is fierce.
That one there has Jim Bowie’s toothache.
He’s buried, you know,
jest a street over,
with all those Mexican Cath-o-lics.

They say,
It’s them experimented souls,
Lurking around floor twelve, but we know,
It’s Emily, our golden girl,
jest wanting some attention.
So go on,
she don’t mean no harm.
’Less your name is
Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna.

Well, then you best disappear.
Fall in that river there,
Or into those stars;
Because beauty is fleeting
And well…
Son, you ought to know the rest.

Thank the Good Lord for a woman’s charm
Thank the Good Lord for Our Emily.
Cold, standardized houses dawdle about the yards on either side of the street. The one on the corner looks a little better, but still like the rest. A droll yellow paint covers one too many in this town.

The comfort of my leather jacket seems my only redeeming thought. I can still feel the pulse in my shivering fingers, which I have tucked into my pockets to hide the blood. A writhing pain is moving its way up my abdomen, and the warmth beneath my ribs is now beyond my worries. I’m gonna die.

Gotta keep my mind off of this, gotta breathe. I feel too alive to be a dead man walking, but they’re gonna find my knife like that and wonder why I didn’t think to try and get it back. The knife probably saved my life. It’s what my pals would tell me: “A good knife is better than a good friend.” I suppose they meant that—when their friendship failed—a good knife wouldn’t.

To hell with it; I’ll never get that knife back. I couldn’t pull the blade out no matter how I went about it. I tried once. Couldn’t get past the slip of the blood. I tried again. The cross caught his rib.

So I gave up. I just couldn’t take it. And I ran all the way here, though I hardly know where I mean to go.

Soon as I get that sleepy feeling in my brain, I feel a sharp sting. I go to see if I’m still losing blood. I try to remember not to wipe my hands on my jeans. A quick look between the wings of my coat and I see the blood is still wet, so I try to think of something good. The adrenaline makes me walk and think a little faster, but I’m forgetting how to breathe.

It’s colder. The sun must be getting lower, even though it’s already down under the horizon. I figure that’s how it must work. That the sun and all its brightness just keeps going down as the night gets on. Hell, I hate that I always end up hurt—and not dead, like the lucky guy.
I answer the knock
Like a single mother in the slums.
    Your parasitic smile reminds me
    Why I prefer to be alone.
You throw your bag down like you own the place;
I guess I never told you that you didn’t.

Maybe you should ask me out;
I just might surprise you
    By saying “no.”

Friday nights to you are Evenings—
Classy my ass.
    You’d get better service at a Super Eight;
    At least they tell you where to shove your room key.
Supposedly it doesn’t matter
So long as the cable is free.

The idea seeps through my mind—
Maybe he’s worth trusting
    We could pretend …

Screw it.
Friday as usual.

The silence calls for random trivia
(You haven’t surprised me yet, but here’s hoping)
    Me first.

“What’s your favorite kind of insect?” I ask.
    “Dung beetle.
It’s not ashamed to eat its own crap;  
I only wish people were that honest.”

I prefer hornets, personally.  
They sting when they’re pissed  
And don’t bother to apologize.  
Afterwards they die, content.  
Plus the name hornet  
Sounds like “whore,” which is funny I guess.

Popcorn never could stay away from your curls;  
I’m just as excitable in your lap bowl.  
Get me out of your hair if you dare.

At first glance  
This might look like an ideal relationship—  
Laugh.  
Any interest I have in what’s above  
Your belt buckle  
Knows better.

We make lust to the sound of  
Maroon 5 Screaming that this love has taken its toll on them.  
I can’t help but agree.

Saturday morning you’ve cleared out  
With your conscience;  
I swallow any regret  
With 8 oz. of water,  
A Plan-B pill  
And my pride.

Your face is stoic at Sunday mass.  
Later I’ll pass you on my way to confession:  
“Don’t mention my name.”  
I wasn’t planning to.  
Three Hail Mary’s and a cross-my-heart,  
But I’ll be back next week.

Sunday as usual.
Guardian of my blood, you digest bacteria
and feed on foreign particles. Extending
legs and arms outward in embrace—
a promise
  to become one
  to cleanse
  to dissolve debris

of broken cells and gather in the dying.
I have only to offer my burning skin
and you give your life to soothe
inflammation.
  You recognize
  internalize
  burst through

my diseases. I am undeserving
of replenishment—a hollow vessel
satisfied as you multiply inside me to fill
each liter of life. Perfect color
  red
  blue
  pink—

we differentiate purity and stain.
Complementary structures, let us
regenerate dendritic branches together.
Let us dissolve
  contagions
  and become
  immune.
The old folks’ home had short blue carpeting on all floors, chosen more from a spartan budget than for aesthetics. The color fit the building and ambience, and complemented the sterile, alcohol-stung air and the feel of age everywhere. The walls were beige, hardly more than brittle and cheaply painted sheet rock. The elderly did not care, Jakob thought. They did not run their fingers down the walls as they limped to their apartments. They did not feel the razored carpet that clung like Velcro to their slippers.

The old had only their fading vision and memories to distract them from their food and infrequent visitors.

Jakob shook the thought from his mind. His mother had guilted him into visiting his grandmother. He knew his mother would never visit her herself, ever since she sent Granny here instead of letting her stay at their house after those first few years. His mother always had Jakob do the dirty work.

Jakob knew Lanie Herzog had her own bed and miniature sitting room—that is, she had a twin bed, one chair for visitors, a bathroom she shared with her roommate, and a thick, polyester curtain that separated the room in half to give a feel of pseudo-privacy. The little money Granny Lanie had left secured her a small holding here. Food, housing, and care were all provided for the fee. Yet, he thought the architects could have made the building less a maze. It was not as if the elderly would attempt to escape. They did not have the energy to try. Most of them did not have their minds anymore. So why was Granny’s room so hard to find?

Jakob turned another hall and saw more beige and blue, the door numbers brown beside each industrial door handle. Nursing home attendants pushed carts full of medicine bottles and processed dinners down the halls. The elderly—what did they do all day?—leaned on their canes and greeted the attendants with toothless smiles. None of the old looked too long at the carts. Jakob would not have either, if he had seen a cart full of tasteless food and his daily pills. He knew he was not imagining the resentment he saw in the eyes of the aged, at their time on earth and what it had inevitably bought them. Age and wisdom, he knew by now, brought
only loneliness and betrayal. Few children chose to house their parents and instead blamed their inability to maintain the adequate level of care. The nursing home, run by strangers, would have to do.

Life, he realized, passed inexorably, like a juggernaut through cracking ice. Life never stopped, it never slowed, and time was cold to man’s hopes. The most one could hope for was that the happy times seemed long and slow, and that the horrors passed and stayed in the past. Jakob had a place he kept those horrible moments, far and deep down inside himself, where he compressed them until he forgot them. At least, he hoped he forgot them.

“Miss,” he asked a nurse, “I’m looking for Lanie Herzog. Where is her room—”

“Oh, Lanie—didn’t they tell you? We moved her to the dementia ward, room 366B. But she’s not there right now. She’s in the downstairs lobby. I just saw her. Here, let me take you to her.”

“Yeah, thanks.” Jakob followed the nurse. The halls seemed easy and straightforward with a guide, and he wondered how he had been confused earlier.

The nurse turned a sharp corner and stopped on the threshold of the lobby. A TV, suspended near the ceiling, played a soap opera so low he could not hear any of the speakers, though black-boxed words scrolled across the bottom of the screen. Jakob was positive the elderly could not read the closed captioning so quickly. Overstuffed recliners and cheap card tables were set up around the room, and Jakob could smell a soiled diaper. Across the room, he saw his grandmother.

She stroked the curve of her cane with a gnarled, pale hand. Her arm was all angles, skinny and sagging. Even from a distance, he could see that her eyes, which he remembered had always been bright with mischief, were now dull and rheumy.

“Granny,” he said as he walked up to her. She did not hear, so he repeated himself. “Granny. Granny! It’s me, Jakob.”

She peered at him, eyes squinting. “Jakob? I don’t know a Jakob. Get away from me! Nurse, nurse! What is this boy doing? What are you—” she swatted his hand away when he leaned in to hold her arm in case she fell. “Nurse! Intruder! Nurse!”

The nurse comforted Lanie Herzog and tried to explain to her that Jakob was her grandson. Jakob stepped back. He felt betrayed, and the monster he always kept pressed down tried to clamber up. He smashed it down again, but he did not come any closer to Granny until the nurse forced him.

“Come, Granny. I’m going to take you to your room.” He patted her soft hand. It had more age spots than he remembered.

The nurse led them, and he watched the room numbers rise to 366. Granny seemed to have forgotten him again, and she leaned on him as if he
were a second cane. The nurse stopped outside Granny’s door and propped it open for them. The room was shadowed and stank of disinfectant. Jakob pulled out his cell phone.

*Mom,* he began his text, *let’s take Gran home.* He paused his finger over the “send button” before erasing the message. *Mom,* he revised, *don’t make me.*
Darkness moves across an ocean floor
still against its blackened sands
The constant pressure squeezes, freezes
any foolish little life

We feel it in every breath we hold, every
stroke that pulls us deeper into the abyss
We cannot fight it,
or so we believe

Even while we sink, we struggle
for the surface so far above us
Fingers stretching upward, black on black
though we are made to float

We welcome black waters into
our gaping mouths, our burning lungs
Accepting the only fate we can fathom:
to die alone

Our faces, spongy white and sickly, swollen
beyond recognition, grin garishly toward
a now ethereal idea of the surface as we descend
down to drown and drift

Marine snow that sinks gracefully
to lightly sprinkle the silvery bones
of the derisive anglerfish,
master of Hades
When all we had to do
was be still—peace;
Let warm waters carry us to the surface
where sunlight softly streams down,
And beyond an azure watersphere,
above the *hush, hush* of twilit waves
we can breathe
“Pink hands so fine, Gold-branded wine, Spring paints the willows green palace walls can’t confine.”

(Lights up on two women. WOMAN ONE is standing up, CSR. WOMAN TWO is sitting on the floor, in a Zen pose, UPL. There is an enormous world map on the floor. WOMAN ONE turns and sees WOMAN TWO.)

Oh!

WOMAN ONE

(Opening her eyes.)

Yes.

WOMAN TWO

I know you.

WOMAN ONE

You’re my sister.

WOMAN TWO

Why are you here?

WOMAN ONE

I’ve been here.

WOMAN TWO

For how long?

WOMAN ONE
THE BROGUE

Years.

WOMAN TWO

(Pause. WOMAN ONE looks around again.)

Welcome.

WOMAN TWO

I want to leave.

WOMAN ONE

You can't.

WOMAN TWO

I've forgotten my name.

WOMAN ONE

You'll remember.

WOMAN TWO

Why are you over there?

WOMAN ONE

I'm in China.

WOMAN TWO

Oh.

WOMAN ONE

Spiritually, I'm in China.

WOMAN TWO

Where am I?

WOMAN ONE

Where-ever you want to be.

WOMAN TWO

(WOMAN ONE sits down. Waits for WOMAN TWO to speak. Suddenly—)

WOMAN TWO

Definitely Florida.

I never liked Florida.
You should have told me.

What?

That you were going to die.

Didn’t you already know?

Not until it was too late.

I’m sorry.

Good. I was.

Sure?

Yes.

I couldn’t have known that.

Hm.

(Pause. WOMAN TWO draws her Zen meditation to a close.)

Let’s play a game.

Are we allowed?

No one will stop us.

(Sitting down, facing DS)

Which game?
We only know one.

WOMAN ONE

You start.

WOMAN TWO

(They start a clapping game that grows more complex as they progress. It should feel like jazz music—unpremeditated and constantly changing.)

Pink.

WOMAN ONE

Hands.

WOMAN TWO

So.

WOMAN ONE

Did I ever tell you—

WOMAN TWO

(Still clapping)

No.

WOMAN ONE

Are you sure?

WOMAN TWO

You never told me anything.

WOMAN ONE

(Stopping)

That’s not true.

WOMAN ONE

(Continuing)

Nothing that mattered.

WOMAN TWO

What?

WOMAN ONE

(Stopping)

What did you ever tell me?
WOMAN TWO
Well…I told you about Doug.

OKAY.

WOMAN TWO
He was hot!

WOMAN ONE
In grade school?

WOMAN TWO
I really liked him.

WOMAN ONE
It doesn't count.

WOMAN TWO
Where did we leave off?

WOMAN ONE
In what?

WOMAN TWO
The game.

WOMAN ONE
I don't care.

WOMAN TWO
So!

(Starting clapping again)

WOMAN ONE
So.

(Clapping without enthusiasm)

WOMAN TWO
Fine.

WOMAN ONE
Gold.

WOMAN TWO
Branded.

WOMAN TWO
Wine.
(Stopping)
I hate this game.

WOMAN ONE

(Stopping)
You wanted to play.

WOMAN TWO

Now I don't.

WOMAN ONE

(Pause.)

WOMAN TWO

I remember everything—even the things I had forgotten.

(Pause.)

Did Jack tell you?

WOMAN TWO

What?

WOMAN ONE

About our affair.

WOMAN TWO

Yes.

WOMAN ONE

Good.

WOMAN TWO

(With irony)
Family loyalty.

WOMAN ONE

It was an accident.

WOMAN TWO

That's what he said.

WOMAN ONE

You know the proverb.

WOMAN TWO

(Pause)

Sex happens?

WOMAN ONE

Sure.

WOMAN TWO
Okay.

There was no obligation.

Like with me?

(Uncomfortable)

No.

Stop.

You wanted—

(Starting to clap)

Gold.

I'm willing to talk.

(Continuing clapping.)

Gold—

(Pause)

Play the game.

(Starting to clap)

Branded.

Wine.

Willows.

Green.

Cake.
That’s not in the game.

Next.

Palace.

Walls.

Confine.

(Stopping)
That’s depressing.

Confine.

My mind is blank.

(WOMAN ONE stops clapping.
Pause.)

(Turning to her sister.)
By the way…

What.

(WOMAN ONE)
(Going north, to South Carolina)
Why wouldn’t you tell me?

About?

You dying.

(WOMAN TWO)
(Crossing down to Saudi Arabia)
I didn’t want to let death in.
Everyone dies.

WOMAN ONE

Yes.

WOMAN TWO

So you ran away.

WOMAN ONE

I'd always wanted to see Asia.

WOMAN TWO

We got the postcards.

WOMAN ONE

You're welcome.

WOMAN TWO

Then they stopped. After Sri Lanka. Is that where—

WOMAN ONE

Yes.

WOMAN TWO

It came.

WOMAN ONE

Yes.

WOMAN TWO

Did it hurt?

WOMAN ONE

(Shrugs.)

WOMAN TWO

Not really.

(Pause)

WOMAN ONE

I had a lot of time.

WOMAN TWO

To think?

WOMAN ONE

Yes.

WOMAN TWO

I'm still sorry.
I'm not.

Really.

Did you ever have babies?

Several.

Hm.

I named one after you.

Is she here?

It was a boy.

Really?

He'll come someday.

All right.

Life is good for him.

Death is easier.

No. It isn't.

Really?

Really.

How did you—?
WOMAN ONE
Silenced. In pain.
(Pause.)
Thinking wasn't important.

WOMAN TWO
I see.
(Pause.)
(Moving West, towards Egypt.)
Are we still family?

WOMAN ONE
Yes. I think so.

WOMAN TWO
I mean—now.

(Moving West, towards Egypt.)
Are we still family?

WOMAN ONE
Yes.
(Pause. Moves westward.)
I'm in the Red Sea, now.

WOMAN TWO
Is it wet?

WOMAN ONE
I can't feel anything. Where did we leave off?

WOMAN TWO
I don't remember.

WOMAN TWO
(Starting clapping rhythm)
Pink.

WOMAN ONE
(Joining in)
Hands.

WOMAN TWO
So.

WOMAN ONE
Fine.
Gold.

WOMAN TWO

Branded.

WOMAN ONE

Wine.

WOMAN TWO

Willows.

WOMAN ONE

Green.

WOMAN TWO

Palace.

WOMAN ONE

Walls.

(Pause)

WOMAN TWO

Can’t.

WOMAN ONE

Confine.

(Doubles rhythm)

Confine.

WOMAN TWO

Can’t.

WOMAN ONE

Palace.

WOMAN TWO

(Stopping)

Wait.

WOMAN ONE

What?

Can we say anything but the truth here?

WOMAN TWO

(Stopping)

I don’t know. Let’s try.

WOMAN ONE
WOMAN TWO

(Moves into Africa)
I—

(She mouths silently for a few moments.)

WOMAN ONE

(Moving toward her. Stops in the Atlantic Ocean.)
I can't hear you.

WOMAN TWO

I said—

(Mouthing)

WOMAN ONE

It’s not getting through.

WOMAN TWO

We have to tell the truth, then.

WOMAN ONE

Isn’t that what we’ve been doing?

WOMAN TWO

Yes.

WOMAN ONE

Okay.

WOMAN TWO

It would be nice to mix it up a little, sometimes.

WOMAN ONE

No. It wouldn’t.

(Pause.)

The Atlantic Ocean is calming.

(Pause.)

You should try it.

WOMAN TWO

(Standing in place)
Fine.

(She starts clapping again.)

WOMAN ONE

I love you.

WOMAN TWO

(Stopping)
I heard that.
I love you.

WOMAN ONE

You’re not lying.

WOMAN TWO

Do you love me back?

WOMAN ONE

Well—Loving people was never my forte.

WOMAN TWO

That’s what Jack said.

WOMAN ONE

He wasn’t kidding.

WOMAN TWO

I still love you.

WOMAN ONE

Okay.

WOMAN TWO

Would you like to play?

WOMAN ONE

No. Maybe. All right, fine.

WOMAN TWO

(They start to clap with a slow rhythm. Gathering speed. This time, they both stand and move toward each other. Their footsteps are a part of the rhythm.)

Confine.

WOMAN ONE

Can’t.

WOMAN TWO

Walls.

WOMAN ONE

Palace.

WOMAN TWO

Wine.

WOMAN ONE
I like wine.

The game—

Branded.

Gold.

(Continuing clapping)
I never loved you.

No?

But I missed you.

(In integrating the woman into the clapping pattern.)
In Asia. You would have liked the tigers.

Probably.

And I always hoped that you lived happily.

Pink.

Pink?

(The turning, back to back with WOMAN TWO, still clapping)
The game.

Purple.

I did.

What?
THE BROGUE

Lived. Happily.

WOMAN ONE

Good. I wanted that for you.

WOMAN TWO

What was your word?

WOMAN ONE

Purple.

WOMAN TWO

That’s not in the game.

WOMAN ONE

It makes it more interesting.

WOMAN TWO

Hands.

WOMAN ONE

We forgot the willows.

WOMAN TWO

Next time, we’ll remember.

WOMAN ONE

(They slowly reach a sitting position on the floor.)

Pink.

WOMAN TWO

Hands.

WOMAN ONE

So.

WOMAN TWO

Fine.

WOMAN ONE

(Lights down as the women play the game again, slowing as the blackout draws near.)
Ice-heavy branches seem solid in winter,
Locked like crystal-castles on barked tree-skins.
Bark on fingers, bark on hands,
Knuckles red-raw and cold burn on the edges.

Ice-heavy and clear, thick crystal drips,
Slender bent-branches inside falling ice-spires:
Like trapped trees, like hidden secrets,
Ice-mirrors drip lights, rain-mud catches thoughts.

Some winter-wanderer watches icicles melt.
The frozen pictures drip-drop to memory.
Brown spikes of bark, held in falling ice spears,
Are only winter-water—naught but dream and cold air.
As sunlight crashes through the kitchen window, your grin makes my rib cage stir like it’s just eggshell. Your fingers have picked clean the bowl and now they’ve painted a masterpiece upon your face. Maps, old crap photographs printed in sticky juice-ink. Your teeth are stained with the gore of raspberries as if they’ve carved out my heart.
She sighs restlessly,  
rubs her aching forehead with callous stained  
with No. 2 lead and oil from  
too many different fingers on the keyboard.  
Babe’s asleep, but tiny voices tumble down  
the stairs and into her concentration.  
There will be no studying tonight.

Bare soles stick through sock holes  
to a kitchen floor that hasn’t been mopped yet.  
The front door squeaks in protest, frayed  
blue paint haphazardly decorated  
with scratches from forks and crayons,  
like the walls.  
She has grown used to it.

Cold, dry country wind  
on her face, in her hair,  
cutting through the plaid overshirt  
that mother hates because it defeminizes  
hers already broad figure.  Bare  
soles now feel the cold stone sidewalk  
that leads to the gravel drive,  
though the cars lie broken down  
in sullen uselessness.  
She has grown used to them.

The sky is orange and pink,  
brush strokes of lavender clouds  
through which she sees the first evening stars.  
Over the western hillside, the day dies
slowly in the mirror of the neighbor’s lake
Behind the eastern forest, night is born anew
in softly creeping, blackened fingers.
She sees freedom.

She steps around neglected toys and bikes,
wobbling gingerly across the sharp, ice-cube
stones of the driveway,
closer toward that dimming horizon.
The wind is harsh, rising
goose bumps and a flush on her skin.
The sun is gone, followed its filmy halo
behind rippling black silhouettes.
UNTITLED

by Molly Manning

(manipulated silver gelatin print)
PANICLE
by Samara Thomas
(foam fruit nets)
LOOK AT THE STARS

by Mikael Jury

(woodcut print)
AND THIS IS HOW WE SAY GOODBYE

by Maria Hayden

(ink, pen, markers on paper)
SOLIPSISM II
by Samara Thomas
(silver gelatin print)
PHAGOCYTE
by Samara Thomas
(ink on wood glue)
FRESHWATER WEST, WALES
by Samara Thomas
(silver gelatin print)
What the hell, Charlotte?” Eloise leaned on her faux wood cane and looked at her friend lying in the casket framed by carnations and birds of paradise. “Did you ask for these flowers? They are absolutely tacky together.” Of course you would.

Charlotte’s family stood in the back wiping their noses. Eloise was the only non-family member left at the viewing of Charlotte Alice Maple who had outlived her four sisters, a brother who was unaccounted for, a husband, and one son. She was survived by a daughter, who broke her tradition of visiting every five years to come to the funeral. Charlotte’s two grandchildren cried but probably from hunger and scratchy clothes. The stranger lying like a mannequin in the coffin had been known only through Christmas and birthday gifts.

Charlotte’s son-in-law placed his hand on Eloise’s shoulder. “Ma’am, the funeral home wants to close up.”

Eloise straightened her back and gripped her cane. “I’ll be done in two minutes.” She looked down at Charlotte whose soft hands lay folded in her lap. “He does smell funny. I don’t like him either.” She hit the rubber bottom of the cane on the tile floor. “Dammit, Charlotte, you weren’t supposed to die yet.” She turned around and walked past Charlotte’s family, through the doors, and out to her navy blue Buick. The sun beat down on her black dress worn only for funerals. She had bought it twenty years before because it had been on sale at Sears. Since then, she had worn it to mourn too many. The dress had become threadbare, but the pain had yet to diminish.

***

The following afternoon, Eloise had just sat down with a mug of lemon ginger tea when the doorbell rang. The bell was followed immediately by a knock. “I’m coming!” She lowered her voice. “I’m old, stupid.” It was a short walk to the front door from the living room, but it wasn’t easy anymore.
When she opened the door a crack, she saw Charlotte’s son-in-law in jeans and a t-shirt, holding a package.

“Um, hi.” He looked at her face. “Oh, you’re the woman from yesterday. Are you Eloise?”

She still gripped the door handle. “Yes, I am.”

He stuck his hand out. “I’m Philip Stansbrok, Charlotte’s son-in-law.”

“Oh, yes.” Her upbringing made her hand meet his a moment. “Eloise Evendell, Charlotte’s best friend.” She opened the door another inch.

“Would you like to come in?”

Philip fumbled with the package. “No, uh, just found this when we were cleaning through Charlotte’s apart—uh, condo, this weekend, and well, thought since it had your name and address on it,” he offered her the package, “you probably should have it.”

She took the package. It was heavy for its size. “Thank you. Have a nice day.”

“No problem. See you, well…yeah.” He turned away, but quickly turned his head. “Nice to meet you.”

Eloise smiled. The summer wreath of sunflowers and wheat heads bumped against the door as she closed it. She shuffled back to her pale pink recliner where her cane lay. She placed the package, wrapped in a brown paper grocery bag, next to her mug on the side table. “Eh, my tea’s gotten cool. Too much effort to heat it up.” She nestled into her recliner.

“It’s summer.” Her attention went back to the package with her name and address on it punctuated by a smiley face. She took a sip of tea and smacked her lips. “A lil’ strong. What did you do this time, Charlotte?”

She placed the tea cup on the table and took the package onto her lap. The brown paper was smooth and still hinted a whiff of apples and…wine? Eloise chuckled, “Charlotte....” She unwrapped the paper and found three black-and-white, college-ruled composition notebooks numbered one, two, and three. The third one looked older, more worn than the others. Eloise opened the notebook marked one first.

Charlotte’s cursive scrawl, taught in grade school and morphed through age, filled the first page.

Eloise Dear,

March 5

If you are reading this, then you are either a horrible sneak or I am dead (I have always wanted to say that!)

“You would.” Another sip of tea.

My death came as a surprise to you I’m sure. I’m sorry I did not warn you, but I knew you would be upset if I told you. I found out a week ago today that a disease I thought had disappeared had reared its head again. The doctors told me there was no further cure and I have about
THIRTY-PERCENT CHANCE OF RAIN

three months to live. I know we had plans to visit the world, or what we could manage, but I cannot do that now. You have probably recognized my increased slowness. I hate to leave you like this, but you would have pampered me and you know that is something I, like you, do not like—being pampered.

Now for these books: Read them in order and follow the instructions. I have different letters for each, and each will ask you to do something. No arguing. Just do it. Take a picture if possible; I like pictures.

I have no idea what it will be like, not being here on earth. I think I will miss you. You have been a good friend when simply a friend would have been sufficient. Love you, Curlers.

Sincerely,
Charlotte A. Maple

P.S. - Don't read any more today.

Eloise sat back in her chair, letting her fingers run over the slight indents of Charlotte’s writing. A tear filled her left eye. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

***

It was Tuesday, which meant it was Eloise’s turn to make dinner and Charlotte would come over with a vegetable. Except today, Charlotte was not coming over. Eloise just sat in her chair. How do you make a meal for one?

The notebooks still sat on the table with the half-full tea cup from earlier. She had read the letter three times, set it down, then picked it up and read another two times. Her grandmother clock rang five o’ clock. She had been sitting there for two and a half hours. She flicked on the local news. It had suddenly become oppressively quiet, and she needed something to fill the back pocket of her brain that wanted to think. There seemed to have been another suspect in a long running case, and a local animal shelter was begging people to adopt because they were running out of room. While the smiling woman explained after a “brief” break they would tell what surprises the weather had, Eloise pushed herself out of the chair and waddled into the kitchen. Her knees and hips were tight after two and a half hours of not moving.

She flipped the fluorescent light on. It was a relief not to hear the hum of the lights over the television. They were too bright for the little kitchen, but the sales person claimed they were energy efficient. Charlotte had joked the lights were almost so bright that she didn’t need her glasses to see the individual tiles on the backsplash. Eloise just saw every stain on the yellowed refrigerator.

She opened the refrigerator and looked at a leftover casserole and a bag of hotdogs. She reached for the casserole, tuna if she remembered right, and expected Charlotte to walk through the front door proclaiming that she
better not be feeding her leftovers. Charlotte always demanded a real meal, because leftovers were for lunch. But no one came through the door; no one stopped her as she scooped out a portion onto her plate and stuck it in the microwave. The only sound was a man on the television trying to convince her that his mattress sale was the best of the year. The microwave beeped, and Eloise sat down just in time to hear the big weather surprise—no rain was in the forecast, and it should be sunny and in the high eighties for the rest of the week, just like the past two weeks.

* * *

Wednesday morning, Eloise opened her eyes and looked at the clock—six A.M. She had no reason to get up, but she wasn’t tired enough to stay in bed. Getting out of bed was a slow process. She stretched her arms, legs, and back; she had to rock out of the bed.

Once the coffee was started, she cleaned up and rolled her hair. She wasn’t planning on going anywhere, but it was habit, and she wanted to look nice. She grabbed the newspaper and sat at the window overlooking her neighbor’s garden. She shook the newspaper open to the weather report and comics. That’s strange. The weather had a thirty percent chance of rain for the day. It had been zero percent and the news last night confirmed it for the rest of the week. “They never agree. Trying to get hopes up.”

She was chuckling at Garfield’s most recent joke on Jon, when her eyes caught sight of the notebooks. It was nerve-wracking to hear Charlotte’s voice in the letters, but it was comforting too. She grabbed number one and flipped it open past the first letter and to the second.

Eloise Dear,

Good morning to you. Today you told me you had never had a drink in your life. I am going to change that. Today, I want you to go to the store and buy a Rosé Wine. I think you will like that best. It doesn’t matter which brand, just needs to be Rosé.

“Charlotte! I would never!” She threw the book on the table. “What if someone sees me?” She immediately picked it up out of curiosity.

I know you probably think I’ve gone nuts, but we both know that happened years ago. Trust me, it is light and fruity, and it might help you relax a bit. Eloise dear, you need to relax. Enjoy life. I’m gone. I can’t enjoy it anymore, and you’re not far behind. Love you, Curlers.

Sincerely,
The Drunk Friend
Eloise tossed the book to the floor. “I refuse. You are gone and cannot make me go against what I believe. You are crazy, Charlotte, crazy.” She finished her coffee and rinsed out the mug and made cream of wheat with maple syrup. It reminded her of her childhood: legs swinging and hair in two braids. She would eat the cream of wheat every morning with either brown sugar or maple syrup and drink her entire glass of orange juice before the bus came. Her mother didn’t care that orange juice and maple syrup didn’t go together—both were good for you and you finished everything in the bowl. Her mother would then hand her a bagged lunch and kiss her forehead. “Bye, Ellie Jo.”

Eloise realized she had been staring at the picket fence around the neighbor’s garden. She looked down at her congealing cream of wheat. “Drat.” She finished it quickly before it solidified.

After breakfast, she cleaned up the kitchen and the living room, which involved a heavy dusting. She looked at the clock which read ten A.M. “Hm, I guess I’ll start my program and then start on laundry.” She grabbed the remote and pressed the power button. The initial squeal from the T.V indicated it was turning on, but no picture appeared. Before she could press another button she smelled something burning and saw smoke coming out of the vents of the T.V. “Shoot!” She hurried to the plug and yanked the cord out of the wall. “I don’t have the money to get you replaced, you piece of junk. I’m doing laundry.”

As the laundry went through wash, rinse, and dry, Eloise read her battered Jane Eyre. The truth about Rochester’s marriage was about to be revealed when the dryer buzzed. She folded or hung each piece accordingly, just as she had done every time before that.

“Hotdogs for lunch with some peas sound good.” She leaned heavily on her cane into the kitchen; she had been moving too much in the morning. She pulled out the bag of hotdogs and saw creamy slime mixing with the processed meat and almost threw up what was left of breakfast. “That is it. I am going shopping. There is nothing left in the house to eat.”

She saw the notebook lying on the ground where she had swept around it. She pointed at it. “No. No, you have not won. I will go to the store and buy fruits and vegetables and new hotdogs. No wine.” The cane hit the floor for emphasis.

It took her only a few minutes to get into her car because of her morning preparation. On the drive to the store, she noticed the gas was getting low. “I’ll get that on my way back.” At the grocery store she grabbed a cart, placed her cane in the basket and headed inside, list in hand. She knew where each thing on her list was and exactly what it should cost. It took her fifteen minutes. She walked, head high, to the check-out past the wine aisles. She slowed down and glanced over. Bottle after bottle sat on the shelves; various labels claiming various awards and ages. “No, Eloise. Charlotte will not win.” She stepped forward, glanced around, and seeing no one she knew ducked into the aisle.
This wine appeared to be of the box variety. Cheap. So she continued
down the aisle and around to the other side. She stood there, hand on cart
staring up at the bottles, while Italian, French, and Spanish labels looked
down on her.

“Ma’am?”
She started and looked at the stock boy getting her attention. “Yes?”
“Are you finding what you are looking for?”
She saw the store vest and nametag—Donald. “Um, well, I don’t know.
My…friend asked me to get something, but I’m not a drinker, so I’m not
sure what I’m supposed to be looking for.”

“Did she say a brand?”
He didn’t look old enough to drink. “She said a Rosé would be good.
Something fruity.”

“Well, over here is a Tapena Rosé, extremely fruity. Here is an American
one, Ironstone Xpression Rosé. It’s cheaper and is more like lemonade
for adults.”

“Are you even old enough to drink?” Eloise looked past him down the
aisle to watch for people.

He followed her eyes to see what she was looking at. “Ma’am, I’m
twenty-six years old.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’ll take the American one. I—my friend likes
supporting America.” She grabbed the wine and hid it under the bag of
apples. “Thank you for your help.”

She walked as fast as she could to the check-out. She chose the shortest
line and started filling out the check before the clerk could ask her if she
had any coupons.

Eloise waved her on. “No, no coupons, but I’m in a hurry, please.”

“That’ll be $31.56.”

“Stupid wine.” She handed her the check.

“I’ll need to see I.D. please.”

Eloise gripped her purse. “I’m over twenty-one I can assure you.” The
clerk waved the check. “Oh, I’m sorry.” She fumbled with her purse and
pulled out her driver’s license. “Here.” She heard an impatient sigh behind her.

The lady gave the driver’s license back. “Thank you, have a nice day. Do
you need help?”

Eloise shoved the cart out of check-out. “No, I have it.”

Another young man with acne offered to help pack her car, but she
swept by him, walking faster than she had in years. She barely looked left
and right and took her pedestrian right of way to her Buick, sitting there
patiently locked. She shuffled through her purse. “Where are those damn
keys?” Finding them, she unlocked the car, threw in her bags forgetting their
fragile nature. She almost forgot her cane in her hurry to get into her car.

She drove five miles over the speed limit towards her neighborhood.
“Gas!” She glanced over her shoulder and shifted lanes. A mother in a
minivan honked at her as she braked hard and turned into the yellow and
red gas station. She pulled up to a pump and pushed herself out of the
Buick. A strong wind helped blow the door closed. She saw dark clouds building in the west. “Must be that thirty percent chance.” The gas pump was slower than usual and someone was using their cellphone while pumping gas. “Some people. I guess that will be God’s judgment.” She tapped the last drops of gas into the tank. “You just want me up there with you, don’t you Charlotte?”

The rest of the trip home was uneventful. She pulled up into the driveway and turned off the car. She leaned back into the seat and took a deep breath in and giggled. It grew into a full laugh. She laughed until her neighbor pulled up and looked over, worried. Eloise situated herself and got out of the car smiling. “Hello, Trisha!” Trisha nodded back and walked into the house. Eloise grabbed her groceries and hobbled inside, remembering her age again.

She set the wine bottle down in the middle of the breakfast table and placed the apples, bananas, pastas, and meats in their proper places. She then grabbed a glass and sat down in front of the bottle and stared at it. The clock said it was twelve thirty, but it would be only a sip. She stared at the bottle again. It was shades of pink and red and a beautiful bottle. A few bubbles floating inside the liquid. She straightened her shoulders. “I will do this. I will show Charlotte. I can live.” She grabbed the bottle, pulled off the paper, and looked at the cork deep inside the bottle. She half laughed, half sobbed, “I don’t even have a damn corkscrew.”

Something tapped against the window. She looked up. It had started to rain.

***

An hour later, the bottle still sat where she had placed it. Eloise was left with a choice: find a corkscrew or give up the challenge. She tapped the table and stared at the bottle. “Well, I’m not going to that store again. What would the people think?” Eloise reached for the chunky landline to call Charlotte for advice. She stopped, her hand paused above the phone. She curled her hand into a fist. “That’s right.” Charlotte couldn’t give her advice anymore. Unless. She hit the counter with her fist. “Ow.” She pushed aside the books on the tables. “Where is that notebook?” She stumbled and looked down to see the notebook where she had thrown it. It was a struggle to pick it off the floor. She flipped to the next letter and found two sentences written in the middle of the page.

P.S. – I know you don’t have one, so go back to the store and buy a corkscrew. Buy a pretty one with a cow or flowers.

Eloise grabbed her purse and hustled to her car. It was still drizzling, and her hair was getting frizzy, but she had committed and was not going back into the house. The drive to the grocery store was shorter than before. She avoided eye contact with anyone she might have met before and made her way to the wine aisle. “Shoot, where am I supposed to find those things?”
“Can I help you?”
Eloise spun around to come face to face with Donald. “You!”
“Ma’am?” His eyes widened. “Oh, you’re back.”
Eloise fumbled with her purse strap. “I, uh, my friend doesn’t have—”
She blushed. “I mean, I need a corkscrew.” Donald continued to stare at her. She remembered her frizzy hair and attempted to pat it into shape. Her stomach growled, and she remembered she had no lunch. “I… I’m not insane, I’m sorry. My best friend died this weekend.”
Donald coughed and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m sorry.” The speakers crackled with a request for help at the front. “Here.” He motioned to the next aisle. “Would this do?”
Eloise blushed again. “I was hoping for one with a decoration. Like flowers or a cow.”
“Cow?” He looked at the display again. “Here’s an owl.”
“Charlotte loved owls,” she murmured. She stared into its wide eyes. “Was Charlotte the friend?”
“Hm? Yes, she made me buy the wine.” A roar startled Eloise. “It’s started raining again.” She laughed. “I forgot my umbrella, so I guess I’m stuck here for a bit. Thank you for your help.”
He stuck his hand out. “Donald.” He drew his hand back awkwardly to rub his head. “You remind me of my grandmother. She passed away two months ago, but she never actually drank anything more than the communion juice.”
Eloise nodded. “Eloise. It was nice to meet you, too.” She walked past him, grabbed a carton of chocolate ice-cream, and walked towards the cashiers. By the time she made it to the front doors, the rain had stopped and a spot of yellow sun shone through the clouds. She drove home without incident, but after she got inside and closed the door, a tightness welled through her stomach and heart and came out a sob. She brought her shaky hand to her mouth. She dropped the grocery bag and leaned against the door. Tears followed the wrinkles down her face.
Why am I crying?
She hadn’t cried since Charlotte had died, but she rarely cried anyway. There were not enough tears to compensate for the sorrows. Now, in the narrow entryway, every moment when she bit her lip and pushed down her emotions came up, and she couldn’t stop them.
“Charlotte—” she coughed. “Why did you leave me? You knew I had no one else, while you—” She waved to thin air. “You had everything and you never even tried. You’re so damn selfish!” She walked into the living room, dark except for faint light coming through the sliding-glass door. The other two journals sat on the side table. She picked them up and shook them above her head. “Sure, tell me to do all of these ridiculous things after you die. What are you going to do next? Tell me to jump out of a plane? You were scared of heights.” The pale blue wall didn’t respond. “You tell me I never lived? All you ever did was drink and mope that your daughter, who you never tried to call, didn’t call you.” She flipped open the worn notebook.
“Are you going to have in here the secrets of your horrible life? A husband who loved you and a beautiful daughter?” The page she had flipped was dated twenty years ago and was filled with Charlotte’s scrawl.

I told her she was making a huge mistake to get married to him. She was going to regret it. She slammed the door and hasn’t talked to me since. She’s going to get roped into marriage and never live life and regret it when she’s too old to do anything. Look at me. I hurt whenever the weather changes. I’ve always wanted to hike the Appalachian Trail. Thomas just wants his casseroles on the table by six every night.

“If you only knew how much I wanted that.” Eloise whispered. She felt the deep indents in the paper. “Funny how we want what the other person has.”
She was brought out of her reverie by a timid knock at her front door. She crinkled her brows. There was another knock, louder this time. With a sigh, she closed the book and hobbled to the door. The emotional outburst had taken a lot out of her. As she opened the door, she noticed the melting ice-cream sitting in the entryway. A young woman with a worn face and messy bun stood on her porch with her hand resting on the head of an elementary school boy. He studied the welcome mat and didn’t look at Eloise.

The woman spoke. “I’m sorry to disturb you.” She took a shaky breath. “I’m Laura,” she pointed behind her, “from across the street, and I need to go somewhere and I can’t bring my son.” She finally made eye contact with Eloise. “Oh, I’m sorry. This was a bad time. It’s just——”

Eloise shook her head and hands. “No, no, I’m fine.” Then she remembered her smeared make-up and wiped under her eyes. “No, I’m fine. Just a hard day. Do you need me to watch him?”

Laura smiled meekly. “Could you? I would usually ask family friends a couple houses down, but the woman’s gone and I don’t know what to do——” She stopped suddenly. “I saw you were home and, well, I know I’ve met you before, and you seem trustworthy.” She motioned to her son. “This is Jeremiah. He’s in first grade—really nice. It will only be a forty-five minutes at the most.”

Eloise opened the door wider. “That’s fine. My T.V is broken and I don’t have toys or books for kids….”

“He brought things.” She brushed his hair back and looked at him. “He’s a good, quiet boy. Won’t you be? Now be nice to Ms.—” She paused and bit her lip. Eloise finished for her. “Eloise Evendell. Eloise is fine.”

Laura glanced at Eloise, grimaced, and looked Jeremiah in the eye. “You’ll be good for Ms. Eloise, right?”

Jeremiah nodded his head and peeked at Eloise. She smiled. “I do have chocolate ice-cream that needs to be eaten.” She bent down. “Do you like chocolate ice-cream?”

He grinned and nodded harder. Laura thanked her again, kissed the top of Jeremiah’s head, and hurried to her car. They waved goodbye until she was too far to see.
Eloise invited Jeremiah in. “So how old are you Jeremiah?”

“I’m six,” He whispered.

She picked up the ice-cream from the floor. “So first grade?” As she walked into the kitchen, she saw the wine sitting on the table and glanced at the boy. He hugged his backpack to his chest and was too busy staring at dried flowers and landscape paintings to see the bottle at first. She pushed aside dirty dishes to place the bowl on the counter. *This kitchen is terrible.*

“One scoop or two?” She asked. *What do they say about the state of your kitchen that it reflects the state of your mind?*

Jeremiah scrambled onto the seat. “One please...Ma’am.” He rested his head on his fists and stared at the pink bottle with the bubbles congregating on the side. He looked up when she placed the bowl in front of him. “Thank you.” He pulled it closer and nodded at the bottle. “It’s pretty.”

Eloise stopped and looked at the bottle with him. The lights reflecting off the glass emphasized the warps in beautiful accidental designs. She had stared at it, but never seen the beauty. She caressed the neck. “It is pretty.”

She turned abruptly back to the kitchen and began to fill the sink.

She was scrubbing burnt egg out the bottom of a pot when Jeremiah spoke up again. “Do you have a cat?”

She glanced back. “A cat? No.”

Ice-cream was smeared around his lips. “My gammy has a cat. His name is Rockafeller. He doesn’t like most people, but he likes me.” He paused to take another bite. “I think it’s cuz he knows I’m nice.”

Eloise rinsed the pot. “I’m sure you are very gentle. I’ve thought about getting a cat.”

Jeremiah nodded once. “You should get a Maine Coon. That’s what Rockafeller is and he’s big and soft.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Thank you for the ice-cream Ms. Eloise. Do you have any kids?”

Eloise dried her hands on the blue towel and joined him at the table.

“No. I never had children.”

“Do you have a husband?”

Eloise swallowed and took his empty bowl to wash in the sink. “Not anymore. He left a long time ago.” In efforts to change the subject she asked, “What does your daddy do?”

“He’s a preacher.” He followed the grain of the table with his finger. “So you’re here all alone?”

She pressed her lips together. “Mhm.” She did not need to cry in front of this boy.

“I could be your friend.” His swinging feet made a soft thump against the chair legs. “I have two friends named Phoebe and Jordan, but you can be my friend, too. Then I would have three.”

The grandmother clock alerted them it was half past the hour, and Eloise glanced at the stove-top clock. “Four-thirty already?” She looked back at Jeremiah who sat on his hands and looked back at her. “Do you know when your mother dropped you off?” He shook his head. “Well,” she said, “do you want to go to my living room and read?”
He picked up his book bag. “I brought five books. Two of them are about bugs.” He followed her into the living room. “You have a lot of breakables.” He held his hands behind his back and studied a glass flower.

She chuckled. “I do. I like pretty things.”

“Like the pink bottle.” He said. “I like bugs.” He sat on the floor with his book spread out. She settled into her pale pink armchair and savored the company of the little boy. They sat there in silence until the doorbell rang. The boy jumped up. “Mommy!”

They both greeted her at the door. “I’m so sorry,” Laura said. “It took longer than I thought. Was he good?” Any mascara she had on earlier seemed to be gone, and her nose was raw.

Eloise smiled and waved her hand. “It’s fine. We had a good time together, didn’t we?”

Jeremiah grinned. “We read books, and I said we could be friends because she’s lonely.”

Laura scolded him. “Be nice.” She smiled again at Eloise. “Thank you again. It’s been kind of hard at home recently.” She squeezed the bridge of her nose. “How much do I owe you?”

Eloise shook her head. “It was my pleasure, really.”

Jeremiah leaped out the door. “Bye, Ms. Eloise!” As Laura and Jeremiah walked out to their car, he recounted their hour and a half together. Before she closed the door, Eloise heard Jeremiah say, “Yeah, she has no kids and she said her husband left like Daddy, so I told her we could be friends.”

Eloise leaned her head against the closed door. She almost opened the door again to ask them back for dinner. She wanted to tell Laura it was going to be okay, this was the hardest part. The empty bed doesn’t feel so wrong after a year or two. “I’ll go over there tomorrow, depending on what crazy thing Charlotte tells me to do.” She nodded resolutely. “Yes, tomorrow.” Her stomach growled. She had forgotten to eat again. In the kitchen she realized that, for being at the store twice that day, she still had nothing worth eating. She stared at the open refrigerator; then opened the freezer. “I do have chocolate ice-cream.” She could hear Charlotte scolding her that she was going to die young. She grabbed the carton and a spoon and made her way to her armchair. “Didn’t work for you.”

With the carton nestled in her lap, Eloise grabbed the journal notebook. “What other secrets do you have, Charlotte?” The dates were separated by months and years; she started near the beginning.

Thomas is so infuriating! I sometimes wish he would just leave. Maybe I should leave.
The next page was smeared. Eloise brought the book closer and squinted.

It's five years today since he died. Thomas wants to visit his grave. I really want to forget about it. I didn't even want him and then he died and I can't deal with knowing I'm glad.

Her eyes widened. “Charlotte.” She couldn't make out a couple of lines.

It’s my fault. I didn't want him. He was the sweetest baby. He made me feel even guiltier for not wanting him. He would have grown up to be just like his Father. I wonder if his wife would have appreciated him.

Eloise rested her hand on the page and closed her eyes. “It wasn’t your fault. Why did you never tell anyone? Why didn't you tell me?” She grabbed the second notebook of letters and opened it. Inside, was letter after letter of Charlotte telling Eloise what to do: buy a cute pair of shoes—hers were too frumpy, go to Key West, tell someone what she really thought. “I think you're crazy.” She flipped to the last page. The letters were shakier, and it was a short letter.

Dearest Friend,

You’ve made it, or you peeked. I’m sure you peeked. I don’t think I’m going to be around much longer. You asked me what was wrong today. I waved it off as being tired. You looked so concerned. Chances are, if you’re reading this, then you’ve read my journal. Do you know all my dirty secrets now? I am a horrible person, I know that. I just have one more thing for you to do. Go to the Appalachians and hike part of the trail for me. It’s beautiful. I love you, Eloise. Hope to see you soon, but not too soon, you have to finish this list. I can assure you I miss you.

With all my love,
Charlotte A. Maple

“No.” The word surprised Eloise. She spoke it again. “No. No I will not do all this. It’s what you wanted to do Charlotte. I never wanted to do this.” She remembered the wine. “Well, yes I’m curious about the wine, but this other stuff is ridiculous.” They had lived the lives that were expected of them. There was no one to impress anymore. “I’m going to do something I want to do.”

She sat up and looked around the dim room. “To begin with, I hate those damn dead flowers.” She gathered a handful. “They collect dust, make my nose itch, and are depressing.” She flipped the kitchen trashcan lid and dumped them in. When the flowers hit the trash, the dust flew everywhere.
and into her face making her sneeze. She gripped the countertop with one hand and wiped her tears away with the other. She chuckled, “This could be extremely detrimental to my health.”

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Eloise awoke to late morning sunlight shining into her eyes. She groaned and rubbed her stiff neck. She had fallen asleep on top of her sheets after a late night of purging her drawers and closets of old papers and miscellaneous shoes. They all sat in black plastic bags at her door, waiting to be taken out to the curb. Her neck was too stiff to look at her clock to see how late she had slept in so she watched the small dust particles dance in the light between the stagnant particles. She existed in a moment without time. The fear and exhilaration of not having control was more than she would have experienced jumping out of plane. She felt like she was finally accepting life when it was almost too late.

She muttered, “Well it will be too late if I just lay here in bed the whole day.” She stayed still for a while longer though. “I should make a casserole. Shepherd’s pie sounds good.” Eloise hoisted herself onto her elbows to look at the digital clock. It was nine-thirty, later than she had slept in years. Her clothes were creased and warm. Her mother would have had something to say about that. She remembered as a middle-schooler that she had been sent to bed with no supper for an unremembered reason. Eloise had thrown herself on the bed and cried herself to sleep at the complete injustice of it. A few hours later, her mother had come in with saltine crackers and a slice of cold meatloaf. As Eloise ate, her mother lectured her to never sleep in day clothes again. It makes you frumpy. Before she left she placed her hand on Eloise’s cheek and said, “You are going to be beautiful. Don’t let anyone see otherwise.”

As Eloise put the final touches of mascara on, she looked at herself in the mirror. She had soft wrinkles and her eyes had gotten dull. Her hair was course and flat. She couldn’t remember what she had done her entire life to get to this point.

She walked into her living room and looked at the physical mementos of her life. Teddy bears, decorative plates, and figurines of German children she had bought herself every Christmas. It was no time to wallow. “We need music.” She limped to the record player, blew the dust off, and picked out her favorite record—Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture played by the London Symphony Orchestra. The record hissed as it started the opening strings and built to its crescendo as she peeled and chopped vegetables. Within fifteen minutes the overture had changed to sizzling, boiling, and clicking of the stove as vegetables and meat browned. Eloise could feel the house waking up; its heart had been revived for the kitchen should never be quiet or cold. She flipped the record and hummed along as she put together the casserole and slid it in the oven.

She left the dishes on the counter. It had always been Charlotte’s job to clean up because Eloise hated cleaning the grime. She turned to the kitchen
table where Charlotte’s notebooks were stacked in the middle next to the closed pink bottle. “Charlotte, I will miss you, but be proud of me. I’m doing something that I want to do.” She took the notebooks and placed them on the top shelf above the broken T.V. “I’m thinking of getting a cat. But Charlotte,” she held her hands as if at the funeral again, “I forgive you, every word. Be at Peace.”

The oven was about to beep so she glanced out the front window to make sure the green Corona was in front of Laura’s house. Satisfied, she grabbed the casserole, the bottle of wine, her purse and cane, locked the front door and made her way across the street.

Outside, the sky had only wisps of clouds on the horizon and a light breeze ruffled palm fronds. She could hear Trisha’s wind chimes resonate, slow and constant. She walked up to the washed-out blue house and paused at the front door before knocking three times. As she waited on the front porch, she watched the wasp nest in the corner. “How do they fit in there?” she muttered. She adjusted her grip on her cane and looked at her parcels. “Dammit.” She sighed. “I will never remember that corkscrew.”

The door opened slowly and Laura’s tired face peeked out. Eloise held up the dish. “Good mor—um—afternoon. I just thought you could use something for dinner tonight. And well,” she motioned to the bottle, “I bought this wine the other day, but I don’t think you’re supposed to drink it alone. May I come in?”
I called Him my better half and thus divided myself into thirds.
She resented Him, berated me for abandoning her to forgotteness.

Mother and Father always said it was good luck to marry a doctor
but I doubted that luck late at night when He blamed her for all of my problems.

She hated that; she hated Him. She made that clear with a ceramic bowl that missed His head by inches.

I’d pushed Him past his limit so He tossed me over the edge into the white, frothy sea of institution, which swallowed me down like 35 milligrams of sanity.

Mr. Milligram became my new best friend. A long-faced realist. A murderer.

She was drowned in glass after glass of tidal waters
as my better half
proved He knew best.
And before I knew it
I'd forgotten her name.

I called him a traitor and thus
absolved myself of guilt.
I resented him, accused him
of abandoning us to the corporeal tide.

Mother and Father said it was bad luck
to divorce a doctor
but I denied any luck brought
by his regurgitated knowledge
claiming the problem was Her.

I hated that; I hated him.
I made that clear
with six stuffed suitcases
lined up by the door.

He pushed me over the edge
so I swam to shore,
where the washed-up
remains of my former life
lay, waiting for me
to reclaim her.

She reestablished herself as
Myself.
A reassuring romantic.
Alive.

Mr. Milligram rattled parting insults
from the depths of my wastebasket
but I knew Myself and I
knew best.
And before too long
I couldn't remember his name.
Forever ago
I became the beach.
I feel all the crabs,
skittery feet dragging,
a swivet of legs
I would love to love them,
but they rob.

A while ago
I became the ocean.
I invade each beautiful lung,
salt bubbles rising in pink walls
I never pop them
It’s just nice
being in something that breathes.

I fought off desire once
Time and sand at the base of my throat
I ran to the sea and drank palmfuls of ocean
Till it slumped back,
scolded but unkillled.
i lay alone, wet sand clinging
to my shirt. Scattered points of darkness
interrupting a field of white beneath me,
a negative of the sky above
the waves crash
the sound of the universe washes over me.

i must go soon; there is life to be lived.
but for now
the sight of eternity above me
its soft fingers hold me tight
encased in rapture,
in this moment i am whole.

so I rise
and piss in the sea.
Mariah parted the beads that blocked the doorway into the room. Inside, the shades were drawn, and incense permeated the air. As she breathed in sandalwood and lavender, she strained her eyes against the semi-darkness. The room was strewn with stuffed couches and astrological posters—it lacked originality for a fortune teller. She picked up the business card off the table that advertised the services of “Gergio Blavatski.” Something fell behind a door partly covered by black velvet.

“Tom,” she called. She pulled the envelope from her small leather purse and dropped a letter on the divination table.

A man appeared in the door frame. He had a full head of black hair and his brown eyes glinted despite the darkness. There was a royal blue scarf wrapped around his neck—the only color on him besides black. He walked towards her.

“God, Mariah, you scared me. I hadn't finished dressing yet. Thought you were an actual customer.” He adjusted the baseball hat she wore and squeezed her cheek. “Shouldn't you be airbrushing something?”

“Don't mock me. Maybe I came seeking the help of the great Gergio.” She pointed to the table. “Read this letter.”

He sat down and unfolded the paper inside. Mariah saw his eyes follow the tiny cursive writing, line by line.

“They want you to come back, eh? Give me your hand.” He didn't wait, but grabbed her palm and held it beneath a lamp.

“Tom, stop. You know I don't—”

He shushed her with the look on his face. She watched as he traced his fingers along her palm and muttered to himself as he studied. “You know I don't believe any of this, right?” He ignored her and continued to work. Finally, he jerked his head up.

He retraced the lines and smirked. “I don't either. But...” His hands tickled her palm. “Your Fate Line and your Travel Line are connected.”

Mariah pulled away from him. “And?”

“Your palm says that you're going on a life changing journey.” She smiled, but felt her stomach churn. “Good thing this is all crap.” She grabbed the letter off the table and slammed the door behind her.
The ShirtStation was right next to Gergio’s shop. Mariah stood behind the counter and tried to look interested. The large bay windows were partly obscured by mannequins wearing the airbrushed tees, hats, and bags, but she could still see the mass of people outside. It was a sunny day in Daytona, and the boardwalk was crowded. The tourists flitted from shop to shop—moths to lights—buying their souvenirs.

Mariah had worked at the shop for almost three years. She could use the equipment, but she preferred to work out front. Coming from a small town in Indiana, the sheer amount of people overwhelmed her at first. But she took quickly to her new home, and now dreaded the thought of a place where she could no longer lose herself on the street.

As soon as Daytona’s Museum of Arts and Sciences accepted her as an intern, she sold everything she had acquired at Indiana State and hopped a plane. The internship was in the Planetarium; she had loved spending her days looking at the heavens projected on the ceiling. She was certain she would be asked to stay on, but the museum didn’t offer her a full-time job. However, going back to Indiana was not an option. She found a job on the boardwalk—just part time she had said—and had been there ever since.

Mariah stuck mostly to herself, and did little but work and relax on the beach. She had found a friend in the psychic next door, but sought few relationships outside of his. Her whole apartment was the size of the room she had at her parent’s house. It was within walking distance of the ShirtStation, so she felt as if her life was only a block wide. She felt safe in that block. After the internship was over, her parents encouraged her to return home and to try to find a job as a science teacher at the local high school. But she couldn’t go back. Now, she wasn’t so sure.

After the shop was closed for the day, she walked back next door. This time, Tom was in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt from the ShirtStation. He held open the door for her, and they headed to a coffee shop down the street.

Tom and Mariah sat in silence, sipping their lattes until he asked to see the letter again. Reluctantly, she pulled it out, and put it on the table between them. Again he read, eyes less strained in the bright light.

“I’ve been thinking about it,” he said after a moment. “Maybe you should go back.”

“I can’t. You know everything. How could you possibly think this is a good idea?”

He didn’t answer for a moment. “I could take you up there, if you want. I know it’s going to be rough and . . . ”

Mariah looked outside at the waves rolling against the beach. She thought about running down the shore, straight into the tide, and allowing the airy foam to drag her beneath.
He seemed to read her mind. “There isn’t anywhere else to run, Mariah. It’s time.”

Mariah was in Chicago with her parents visiting family when she got the call. It was the summer before freshman year of college, and she was looking forward to months of lazy days at her boyfriend’s farm. Mrs. Jacobson’s voice was barely distinguishable on the phone; she was crying so much that Mr. Jacobson got on the line. He told her that Sam had been in an accident and that he was at the hospital. Mariah and her family drove straight back.

Sam was on a four wheeler with his friends when he spun out of control and hit a tree. He was in a coma. As soon as she was by his side, she leaned down and kissed him gently on the lips, held his hand and spoke to him. But he didn’t respond. Mariah was there for a week, two weeks, a month, and still he didn’t stir. The summer went by, and she began packing for school. She decided to go to Indiana State so she could be closer to him. Freshman year, she saw him every weekend. She stayed at the Jacobsons’ home and visited Sam in the hospital, hoping to wake him.

During the summer of sophomore year, Sam’s condition worsened. It became painful to visit him in the hospital, and she was tired of the crippling uncertainty, of the wrenching guilt she felt for hoping that—soon—he would be gone once and for all.

On her last visit, she held Sam’s hand, and squeezed it in time with the monitor’s beeps. Mr. Jacobson came up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder.

“Time goes on Mariah,” he whispered. “We understand. After all, you’re young, and it’s okay that you don’t—”

Mariah stiffened under his touch. She untied the rope bracelet she always wore on her wrist and tied it carefully on Sam’s. “I’ll always love him,” she said defiantly.

She didn’t go back.

After graduation she was at home for a few months looking for a job. She decided she couldn’t stay in the same town and decided to apply for internships. Mariah accepted the first one she qualified for and moved to Daytona.

The last time she had seen Sam Jacobson was six years ago. She hadn’t spoken to the family for four years. That hadn’t stopped the nightmares though. Mariah often woke in the middle of the night covered in sweat, convinced she had just crashed into a tree that bore a resemblance to Sam. She tried using sleeping pills, but the dreams kept returning, so she stopped. Mariah still faced the nighttime with fear.

And now, the letter from Mrs. Jacobson was burning a hole in her hand. Sam had woken up.

Tom slammed closed her car door and walked around to the driver’s side. As she looked at the ShirtStation and Gergio’s shop, her vision blurred. Her parents were ecstatic about the news of Sam, and her homecoming.
Everyone was for the trip except for her. As Tom shifted the gear, she touched his arm. He kept his eyes trained on the road, but he didn’t pull away.

“What do I say?” she asked as he pulled out of the driveway.

He turned on the radio without answering and began to drive. It was going to take about fifteen hours without stopping, but they planned to stretch the trip over two days, each taking a turn at the wheel. She curled up in the front seat for the first few hours and slipped off to sleep.

Mariah dreamt she walked into Tom’s shop. Sitting in the chair, with his palm up on the table, was a man, a gash visible through his thin hair. The man turned around. It was Sam.

Mariah opened her eyes in the sunlight slanting through the window. The flat fields were turning into rolling foothills.

They arrived in Chattanooga later that night. Tom pointed at a hotel sign and rubbed his eyes. “Maybe we should stop here for the night,” he said.

They found a hotel and ordered pizza. After they had devoured the box, they sat on his bed and turned on the television. She watched his hands as they clutched the remote and flipped through the channels. Without the deep purple robe and the gold rings, his hands seemed so small.

“What do your palms say?” Mariah asked suddenly.

Tom held them up in the lamplight for a moment. He shrugged and continued to flip channels.

Mariah took the remote. “No seriously. You said my hands said I needed to go,” she said. She grabbed his left hand and opened the fingers. “What do yours say?”

Tom looked as if he wanted to move away, but he just sighed and took her finger. “The Fate Line,” he said gently dragging her finger over the line, “starts at the wrist.” He pulled her finger towards the middle of the palm, and then moved it to another small line in his palm. “But this line, the Life Line, intersects at the middle.”

Mariah concentrated on the intersection in the middle of his palm. “Meaning?”

Tom pulled his hand away and picked up the remote. “It’s a sign of surrender. Of what I want for the benefit of someone else.” He laughed and began flipping again. “Who made this stuff up anyway?”

Mariah stood up and moved to the other full bed. “Probably some guy named Gergio.” She listened to the soft voices on the TV, and drifted off to sleep.

The next morning she drove. The trees were heavy with green leaves, the branches bending beneath the weight. The color reminded her of trips with Sam and his friends through the woods, or fishing in the lake. The farther they travelled, the more Sam consumed her thoughts. When it got hot, Tom rolled the windows down and let the wind blow into the car. In the rearview mirror, she saw her hair, tangled and flying in her face. Sam never had air conditioning in his truck, so the windows were always down. He told her constantly that he liked that messy look. Mariah rolled the windows back up.

They parked at a rest stop for lunch. Mariah sat with Tom at a picnic table on a concrete slab surrounded by weeds that grew through the cracks.
Mariah picked a few pieces and wove Tom a bracelet, like she used to do as a little girl. As Mariah began to tie the knot around his wrist, she remembered the last time she saw Sam. She had taken off the rope bracelet she always wore, the one from the day at the lake. Sam’s wrist were so thin that she had to double knot the bracelet before laying his hand back on the pillow. The memory was vivid: the smell of alcohol and antiseptic, the beep of machines, the pale light coming through the hospital window. Mariah dropped the tangle of grass from around Tom’s wrist. Tom stepped on it as he led her back to the car.

It was getting dark as they passed the state line into Indiana. Mariah gripped the steering wheel tighter—knuckles white in the darkness.

Tom looked at the GPS on his phone. “You wanna stop for dinner or something? We’re only a couple hours away. We can take our time, right?”

She relaxed her grip on the wheel and sighed in relief. “No rush.”

They pulled into an outdoor shopping center with a little café. The night was warm and heavy. Clouds blocked the stars and the wind began to stir. Tom and Mariah watched the flashes of lightening in the distance as they ate.

After they finished, Tom stood and stretched. “Hasn’t started raining yet. Maybe we should take a walk before we get in the car?”

Mariah looked towards the bit of highway leading north and thought of seeing the Jacobsons and her own parents again. Magnetic north drew her to the interstate and the hospital and Sam, but she owed Tom a little time before he drove again. She followed Tom outside and along a line of stores.

He stopped in front of a small bookstore. “How long you going to be there?” he asked as he intently studied the display.

Mariah sighed. “I really don’t know Tom. It really depends on… everything…”

He nodded. “It would just really suck if I accidentally encouraged my best friend to move away. And then helped her do it.”

Mariah laughed. “What happened to that life-changing journey?” She pointed at her palm dramatically. “It was my fate. It would have happened anyway, right?”

Tom rolled his eyes. “You know I don’t believe in all that.” Thunder rolled a couple miles away. “You know, I kinda wish this trip could last. I hate to go back to work and I know. . . .” He trailed off.

Mariah looked back towards the highway. Sam was so close. She closed her eyes and imagined arriving at the hospital. She envisioned herself walking up the hall and opening the heavy door. But she couldn’t see Sam. Not yet.

She looked back at Tom. “I just gave up hope that he would ever come back. I gave up on him. What kind of person does that make me?”

“You couldn’t spend your life waiting by his bed.” He gave her cheek a pinch, but there was no joke in his brown eyes. “You weren’t wrong for—”

“Yeah, well, I think it sucks,” Mariah said. “Now I get to go give an account to a man that’s six years behind the clock and I—”

Mariah was interrupted by the pressure of Tom’s lips on hers. She stood wrapped in his arms, waiting for a crack of lightening or a deluge of rain.
Any cosmic shift that would explain the blood rushing to her face. But even the wind stopped moving, and all was still. Tom pulled away and stared at her. His dark hair was mussed from the hours in the car, and his smile was brilliant. Mariah closed her eyes and shook her head.

Tom blinked. He turned away and began walking again. “We should go. We have a couple of hours yet.”

She walked faster to meet his long stride. “Tom, I…”

He turned to face her as they reached the car. “That didn’t happen, okay Mariah?” He laughed and the smile returned to his face. “That’s what we call no sleep.” She got back in the car.

The sky was dark and cloudy—the stars lost in inky blackness and the glare of artificial lights from the hospital. The familiar smell of alcohol and antiseptic crashed over Mariah as she strode quickly into the lobby. It smelled like the months she had spent in the room with Sam, while she whispered into his ear and rubbed his hair. She called her mom to let her know that she had gotten into town and was at the hospital.

Tom held her arm and led her up the hallway and toward the right room. Outside the door, Mariah could see Mrs. Jacobson. The woman was the same except for the gray that was starting to grow near her temples. She paced from the door to the nurse’s station and back, talking loudly on the phone. Mariah slowed down as they approached. She dreaded being seen by Mrs. Jacobson, but Tom continued to lead her. When the older woman saw Mariah, she dropped the phone.

The two women stared at each other for a moment before Mrs. Jacobson enveloped Mariah in her skinny arms. Mariah looked over Mrs. Jacobson’s shoulders at Tom, who busied himself with a poster on the wall. Before she could make the proper introductions, Mrs. Jacobson ushered her into the room.

Mariah stepped six years into the past. The flowers were different, but the room was pretty much the same—the blue furniture of professional institutions, a tiny sink, and a bed occupied by a man with dirty blonde hair. He looked lighter than he had been, and his face sported a beard that looked trimmed. His eyes were still closed. It was Sam, the six years barely written across his face.

“Sam.” She could barely whisper his name as she approached the bed.

His eyes opened. They were as deep gray as the last time she had seen them. She waited for some kind of recognition, waited for him to grab her hand or tears to start falling down his face. She willed the moment to come, but he only stared at her, smiling weakly.

Mr. Jacobson stood in the corner of the room. He was gray and heavier than before, but he greeted Mariah with a warm smile. Mr. Jacobson moved behind her and faced the bed. He put a hand on her shoulder.

“This is Mariah,” he said softly towards the bed. “She came to visit you—a friend from before.”

Sam took her hand and shook it.
“Hi, Mariah,” he said, and looked again at his father.

She looked to the sun that rose outside the window. She stood for a while, but he did not speak much, just looked around at everything in the room. She decided to leave as the nurse came in to check him. Mr. Jacobson followed her outside the door.

She ran her fingers through her hair. “How long until he remembers?” she asked.

“That’s just it, Mariah.” He sighed and put a hand on her shoulder. “It might not all come back. It’s too soon to tell, but he was gone a long time, you know?”

Mariah nodded and told Mr. Jacobson that she would be back in the evening. After he hugged her goodbye, she went to the waiting room to look for Tom. He sat in the corner with a magazine opened across his lap, his eyes closed. Mariah sat down next to him, and he stirred.

Tom searched her face. “So?”

She looked to the beige wall of the waiting room. “He may never remember,” she whispered as she started to cry. Tom helped her up and drove her to her parent’s house.

Mariah visited Sam every day. She dug through her old closet and brought anything to him that she thought might jog a memory—keys to his old truck, a baseball autographed by Greg Maddux, his sweater that she had stolen. But nothing seemed to work. He just smiled at her blandly and listened to her speak. He was always entertained, but there was never any recognition.

It was heartbreak all over again. On the trip to Indiana, she had expected that it would be the same as it had been before. She had prepared to explain her new life and to tell him coming back would be impossible. Instead, Mariah watched as he grew acquainted with her like a new friend.

Every night for a week, Mariah returned to her parents’ house and curled on the couch with Tom. He never asked her when she would leave; he never mentioned work or Daytona at all. In the morning Tom made her coffee and let her choose the TV channel every night. Mariah was comforted by his presence, but she knew he would eventually have to leave. After dinner with her family one night, he pulled her aside.

Tom stared at his hands. “Look, Mariah, I have to go back. It’s time.”

He looked at her, and then wrapped his arms around her. “Don’t feel like you have to come back with me. I want you to, you know that,” he whispered into her hair. “But it’s up to you.”

She stood in his arms for a moment and breathed him in. Then, she pushed him gently away. “I need to stay. I left him before, Tom. I can’t... how could I do it again?”
“I know.” He turned and walked down the hall, but turned back. “I should have never brought you.”

Mariah stood in Sam’s room and stared out his window as Tom drove away. Tom had been in the guest room all night, packing his things. The car ride to the hospital was silent. Tom dropped her at the door and turned with a quiet goodbye toward the interstate. When the little car was out of sight, she wiped away a tear and turned back around to face the hospital. When she got up to the room, Sam had the rope bracelet in his hands. He ran the rough material through his fingers.

Sam watched her as she stared. “I woke up with this on,” he said finally. “Dad told me that you could tell me about it.”

She took it from him. The rope was still braided. Mariah closed her eyes and saw the lake. It was so brown that she refused to swim, so Sam had made her get in the boat. The fish weren’t biting, so she took pieces of rope he had in the bottom of the boat and wove a bracelet. Sam smiled as Mariah told him how she never took it off after that sunny day until the night she had told him goodbye. But now, the bracelet felt heavy to her. She remembered a grass braid she wove recently and tried not to cry.

Mariah sat on the edge of the bed and breathed in. The smell of clean overwhelmed her. She thought of Daytona. She imagined the rhythmic thunder of the waves crashing on the shoreline, the room that smelled of salt water and sweat as the swimmers came into the shop. She missed the noises and the bright colors of the boardwalk. Mariah missed the rustle of the beads that blocked the door of Gergio’s shop.

She handed the bracelet back to Sam. Impulsively, she grabbed his hand and traced the lines across his palm. Mariah tried to conjure the poster in Gergio’s with the meaning of the different lines, but she couldn’t. Instead, she looked into the mirror over the bathroom sink. There were dark circles under her eyes, and her hair was a mess. Mariah tried to imagine the days and week and months ahead. She would sit in the room that smelled like antiseptic and try to explain love to a boy lost in time. Perhaps Sam would get his memory back. Perhaps not. She stood and started combing his blond hair. Closing her eyes, she tried to feel the rocking of a small boat on a brown lake and to imagine the joy that the boy with the blond hair was with her. Instead, she only saw brown eyes.

Mariah stood playing with Sam’s hair until he fell asleep. Then, she gently placed his hand palm up on the bed. She traced the Fate Line on her own palm, the one Gergio said signified a life-changing journey. The nurse came in to check Sam’s vitals, and Mariah watched as she gently fixed his bedding.

Mariah leaned over Sam and listened to his gentle breathing. “You’re going to be just fine,” she whispered. Then, she brushed the blond hair off his forehead and kissed him.

In her mind, Mariah was already back in Daytona.
In Nova Scotia, on the island called Cape Breton, there are many mountains. They're the last fringes of the Appalachians straggling up from the south—Sugarloaf, White Hill, Old Smokey, the peak at Meat Cove. On the Cabot Trail that circles the island, cars wind up and down the mountain flanks for one hundred and eighty-five miles. Most of the mountains look the same—are the same, to a lot of people. But past Cape Smokey and Ingonish and Dingwall—over the crumbling asphalt of Cape North roads; past the edges of Cape Breton Highlands National Park; behind a little white cabin across from Aspy Bay—stands the peak of Tenerife.

When we used to drive the two thousand miles from Colorado to Cape Breton on our bi–annual trips to Canada, I whispered that mountain's name to myself. All the words in Nova Scotia have a heavy mystery, a gravity descended from French and Gaelic and Mi'kmaq. But Tenerife—that Spanish name stolen from an island in the Canaries—is ethereal and distant, almost untouchable. It doesn't have the weight of the Scottish names spoken in the highlands of Nova Scotia. Tenerife stretches up behind my great–grandmother's cabin in the folds of the Boreal forest, with its white birch and balsam fir and bunchberry and starflower. A Canadian flag flies on the bald tip of the peak. Rockslides have obliterated the last hundred feet of the trail, and people scramble over them like survivors in rubble to get to the top. But by the flag, there is a book for you to sign and date. Some of the dates go back a hundred years. Hikers pile rocks on that book so the wind won't scatter the pages down into the bay and erase all those names. To climb Tenerife takes two hours at a steady pace—three miles an hour on the flat part of the trail, only one mile an hour on the steep section of roots and rocks. My great-grandmother, Bessie Edwards, whom I called Nana, could do it in forty minutes, running both ways, in her bare feet.

A few years ago, a travel writer came to Cape Breton to do a book on its mountains. He hiked Tenerife from the trailhead by Nana's cabin, now owned by my grandmother Ernestine. People call her Tuni, after those gold Canadian two-dollar coins. When he came down, he told my grandmother he thought the view at the top was the most beautiful in North America. He
highlighted the trailhead in his book, but didn’t mention it being on private property. For two years afterwards, hikers from around the world parked in front of Nana’s cabin and wore a path in the grass and let their dogs loose in those old, old woods. Few asked permission to hike the mountain. One summer, two weeks before I turned nine, I tried to stake a no-trespassing sign beside the house. My grandmother asked me to take it down. There are worse things than getting your grass trampled, she told me. Like what? I asked. Not getting to climb that mountain, she said.

When Captain John Gwinn, the first settler of Cape Breton and my five-times-great-grandfather, stood on the banks of the Old Island, Tenerife towered across the bay. When my brothers and sister and I waded out in between the sandbars and turned back towards Nana’s, we saw the peak there. When we played in the stream that came down through the woods—the stream you reach by a thread of a path that runs from the side of Nana’s cabin through the tall grass—we felt Tenerife’s bulk behind us. At night, when I lay in the side bedroom with the window open, the rush of the tide and the gurgle of the stream and the tremble of the tree leaves seemed to hide something deeper, some sound of the mountain I never really heard. I listened for it when we hiked the trail with Birdman’s dog, when I sat on the porch at sunrise, and when my sister Emily and I filled Tupperware containers with blueberries from the patches across the road. I said the name of the peak to myself, that old and mysterious name, but it didn’t whisper anything back. When Emily and I stayed behind with our grandparents and let the rest of the family return to Colorado, I listened. Sometimes when my grandmother asked us to hang out the laundry, I looked up through the clotheslines at the little spot of color that was the flag on top of the peak. I wandered up the path by myself one day: past the prayer rock Nana used to sit on, up and down the dips of the trail, in between the ferns and the moss, into the shadow of the mountain. But I got tired, and I went back after I got halfway, out through the tunnel of purple lupins at the edge of the forest.

A hunting guide named Theodore Fricker died a few years back in Cape Breton. He spent most of his life on the peak, and after he died a lot of people started calling it his. Slowly, that other old name stopped slipping out of their mouths, and eventually the name officially changed to Theodore’s Mountain. When people talk about it now, they say “the peak” or “Theodore’s.” When I went back to Nova Scotia in the summer of 2012, only the people my grandmother’s age still called it by its true name. The mountain didn’t loom anymore; it seemed shorter than in years past. And even when I whispered its name on my last day—Tenerife, Tenerife—I didn’t hear anything but the stream in the woods. That old mountain and its book full of names kept their secrets. Maybe if I called it by its new title—or by its Mi’kmaq name—it would answer. But I never do. I always call it Tenerife.
There is an instant empathy
with everything pure North.
My senses sharpen
when someone mentions cold.

I am North. They are North.
We are born and bred and raised the same.

I am insatiably curious
with everything East.
I want to know about
the exotic rising sun.

It is mystery. It is clash.
It is everything I am not or pretending to be.

But if you asked me, my
home and heart are West.
This is the unbridled haven
from too many loud ideas.

It is Solid. It is shifting.
Whoever said it had been tamed, lied.

Now, I find myself striving
To be utterly South.
Where everything is different,
but it feels somehow familiar.

I am here. I am opposite.
It is an identity I can’t claim.
KATIE ALLEN is a sophomore Creative Writing major from Woodland Park, Colorado. She writes prose, poetry, and literary nonfiction at a pace unmatched in its slowness. She hopes to use her degree to become a literary agent or an editor—and, of course, an author.

LEX AVELLINO is a Creative Writing major from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He loves to write stories, whether it be in poetic form or prose. He seeks to write novels in which people can not only get lost, but be found.

NICOLE BELL is a freshman Creative Writing/Communications major from High Point, North Carolina. She writes primarily fiction but tries her hand at poetry on occasion. Nicole makes conscious use of the multiple meanings contained in names and titles. She hopes to work as a screenwriter after graduation.

JASON BEUTLER is a former Belhaven student from Salem, Oregon. He primarily writes fiction highlighting the intricacies of everyday life. He plans to be a journalist focusing on the human experience.

HELENA BLANCO is a Creative Writing major from New Orleans, Louisiana. She loves to write poetry and fiction the most and hopes to write a play one day that is decent. She also wants to become an elementary school teacher because she likes to teach kids.

KRISTIN BOES is a Creative Writing major from Ludington, Michigan, who likes to write fiction and poetry. She is unsure about what to do after college, but hopes to be a novelist someday.

KALISSE VAN DELLEN is the Canadian. Born and raised in Lethbridge, Alberta, Kalisse has transplanted herself 2,230 miles away from home to study Communications and Creative Writing as a freshman at Belhaven. She is a backyard explorer, a can't-help-herself-writer, and a red-gummy-bear-lover. Her favorite things are alliteration, superheroes, the Catechism,
her car, and Diet Coke (not necessarily in that order). Kalisse writes non-fiction, poetry, fiction, ditties, essays, and the occasional snarky article. She was first published as a top ten finalist in the International 2006 Celebration of Young Poets. It was a poem about a deer and secrets. She received a $25 dollar check and decided to be a writer.

LINDSAY GILL, a senior Creative Writing and History double-major, hails from Hillsville, Virginia. According to her Meyers-Briggs test results, she should be an engineer; however, her lack of mathematical skills prevent her from getting within ten feet of numbers. She took up writing instead. After graduation, she hopes to attend graduate school, earn a degree in archaeology, and dig in the dirt for the rest of her days—when she isn’t writing, of course.

DAVID GRIMES, known as Tex by his friends and sworn enemies, is embroiled in the battle for a BFA in Creative Writing at Belhaven University. Texas will always be his home, specifically a small town in the hill country called Fredericksburg. Poetry is his favorite genre, although he also dabbles in nonfiction. After he graduates next spring, he plans to keep on loving the love of his life and to pursue a career as a freelance writer and editor-for-hire.

ANNA HOWARD is a Creative Writing major from Alabaster, Alabama, and she loves to write fiction and fantasy. Her goal in life is to have as many adventures as humanly possible, both in life and on the page.

KOREEN HULL is a Creative Writing major but transferring to get her Marketing and Business Management degree and English bachelor of arts. She is from Gulfport, Mississippi, and primarily writes creative nonfiction. She will someday publish novels, travel, and make a living doing whatever it is she loves doing, spreading Truth, and awakening not only herself, but the world.

SARAH JERNIGAN is a Creative Writing major from Fishkill, New York. She likes to write fiction and hopes to be a literary editor or photojournalist.

PAUL! LANG likes to spell his name with an exclamation point. He is a Creative Writing major from the haunted suburban woods of Pennsylvania whose main goal in life is to write stupid things and make them sound literary. He is under the impression that none of his entries have enough talking trashcans in them and will try to remedy this in the future. He prefers to write postmodern works with secret pre-modern skeletons and populates his stories with ridiculous characters who behave almost ridiculously enough to be real people.

LISSIE MASSENGALE is a freshman Creative Writing major who prefers to speak for herself: “So much has changed in my time here in Jackson, including what I thought I would be writing about. I’ve never really
liked change, but I've had to learn to embrace it. Coming from a family of 12 in small-town English, Indiana, the busy, broken streets of Jackson were somewhat of a culture shock for me. Life moves fast, and I usually allow myself to get caught up in it. My writing has been the only outlet through which I can slow down, relax, smell the metaphorical flowers in the metaphorical dirt. I'm so blessed to be here and so blessed to have a God who, among the comings and goings of life, always stays the same.”

JOY PATTERSON is a senior Creative Writing Major from Katy, Texas. She is soon to be Mrs. Aaron Perozo and plans to settle in the Houston area with her husband—her love and inspiration. She hopes to continue her career as an editor and to publish her most recent poetry collection. She is thankful to the Creative Writing Department, both faculty and students, for teaching her to better express the poetry of everyday life.

EMILY POLSON is a freshman who is double-majoring in Creative Writing and English. She is from Ankeny, Iowa, and once wrote an article about de-tasseling corn, which was published in a magazine called Muse. What a very Iowan thing to do. She primarily writes fiction, however, and her future plans remain unaltered from what the announcer said about her as she walked across the stage at homeschool graduation: "Emily aspires to be a starving novelist."

ANNA REBMAN is a Theatre major with a Creative Writing minor. She is from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. She loves to write poetry and scripts. In the future, she hopes to hike Ireland, own a large dog, and glorify God in whatever she is doing.

TIMOTHY SMITH is a junior from Williamsport, Pennsylvania. He is a Creative Writing major and Psychology minor who focuses on short stories and novels. His favorite moment as a writer was when his high school put on his play about a secret-agent dentist, a giant squid, and obese newlyweds. Tim plans to write one really excellent book before he dies.

HANNAH WHITEMAN is a sophomore Creative Writing major from Clinton, Mississippi. She spends most of her time writing poetry, but she has recently discovered the fun in short stories. After graduation, Hannah hopes to attend graduate school and move to New York with her older sister (an actress, of course). When she’s not writing, Hannah enjoys late night Sonic runs with her suitemates.
ACADEMIC YEAR 2013-2014

Awards

TreAnna Bradley  First Place, Essay
“Fading Beauty”
Crown of Beauty Writing Contest

Jill Cromwell  First Place, One-Act Play
“Photograph”
Southern Literary Festival

Lindsay Gill  First Place, Short Fiction
“Twenty-Five”
Southern Literary Festival

Publications

Katie Allen  “Dust to Dust” and “Kid”
Poetry, Catfish Creek (Spring 2014)

Joy Patterson  “Anamnesis”
Poetry, Curator (Oct. 2013)

Scholarships, Graduate School, and Career

Emily Polson  Irish American Scholar
Study Abroad Scholarship
Queens University, Belfast, Northern Ireland
ACADEMIC YEAR 2012-2013

Awards

TreAnna Bradley  First Place, Playwriting
“Duty Calls”
Mississippi Theater Association
David “Tex” Grimes  Second Place, Poetry
“My Father’s Kill”
Southern Literary Festival

Publications

Alexander Avellino  *Lark and Lore*
Children's Illustrated Book
Available at alexanderavellino.com
Courtney Rodgers  “Fuzzy Baby Hair”
Poetry, *Mississippi Aesthetic* (1.1, Spring 2013)
Kalisse Van Dellen  “At Home We Had Chinooks”

Scholarships, Graduate School, and Career

Sarah Christine Bolton  *Children of the Wall*
Independent Documentary Film
Co-Written with Eric Brice Swartz (Director)
childrenofthewall.com
Addie Leak  MFA in Literary Translation
University of Iowa

ACADEMIC YEAR 2011-2012

Awards

Anna Rebmann  First Place, One-Act Play
“Opening the Past”
Southern Literary Festival
*the Brogue*  Second Place, Literary Journals
Southern Literary Festival
Mary Mittwede, Editor
Mary Mittwede  Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award
Belhaven University
Timothy Smith  Third Place, Short Fiction
“Ride”
Southern Literary Festival
Scholarships, Graduate School, and Career

Christina Gustin  MFA in Creative Writing
Vermont College of Fine Arts

ACADEMIC YEAR 2010–2011

Awards

Adrianne Smith  Janet B. McCabe Poetry Prize (National Award)
“In Bridgewater, My Room”
*Ruminate Magazine
Judge: Naomi Shihab Nye

Adrianne Smith  Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award
Belhaven University

Rebecca Yantis  Second Place, Creative Nonfiction
“Shrouds of Snow”
Southern Literary Festival

Publications

Chris Brown, et al.*  *Elizabeth Spencer Gift Book
Limited Edition, Belhaven University
*Lea Coker, Jennifer Daine, Ashlee Davidson,
Emily Goff, Andrew Hedglin, Cathy Karlak,
Martha Krystaponis, Addie Leak, Christina Miles,
Adie Smith, Sarah Swenson

Mary Morris  “During the Pilgrimage of Homes”
Poetry, *Mason’s Road* (1.2, Winter 2011)

Michelle Phelps  “Thomas” and “Fracture”
Poetry, *PULPIT Magazine*, (Summer 2011)

Rick Ward  *Blood for Molasses*, Historical Novel
Spring Morning Publishing, 2010

Scholarships, Graduate School, and Career

Sarah Swenson  Teacher, Teach for America (MS)
Reading and Language Arts

ACADEMIC YEAR 2009–2010

Awards

*the Brogue*  First Place, Literary Journals
Southern Literary Festival
Martha Krystaponis, Editor

Chris Brown  Third Place, Poetry: “Resurrection”
Conference on Christianity and Literature
Student Writing Contest
THE BROGUE

Alex Freel Second Place, Creative Nonfiction “The Lodge” Southern Literary Festival
Anna Rebmann Third Place, Creative Nonfiction “Reading on Eternity’s Doorstep” Southern Literary Festival
Lea Schumacher First Place, One-Act Play “Shadows on the Wall” Southern Literary Festival
Adie Smith Honorable Mention, Janet B. McCabe Poetry Prize “Along the Natchez Trace” Ruminate Magazine
Adie Smith Second Place, Poetry: “On Home” Southern Literary Festival
Sarah Swenson Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award Belhaven University
Sarah Swenson First Place, Fiction “The Grandfather Clock” Southern Literary Festival

Publications

Martha Krystaponis “Puzzle” and “The Boy” Poetry, Diverse Voices Quarterly (Summer 2009)
Adie Smith “Along the Natchez Trace” Poetry, Ruminate (Issue #13)

Scholarships, Graduate School, and Career

David Grimes Maude Gurley Scholarship, Creative Writing Mo‘T·vation Ministry

ACADEMIC YEAR 2008-2009

Awards

the Brogue Third Place, Literary Journals Southern Literary Festival Andrew Hedglin, Editor
Martha Krystaponis Honorable Mention, Creative Nonfiction “Invisibility Cloak” Southern Literary Festival
Addie Leak First Place, Creative Nonfiction “In the Summer When It Sizzles” Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers
Addie Leak Second Place, One-Act Play
“The White Fedora”
Southern Literary Festival
Addie Leak Honorable Mention, Creative Nonfiction
“The Luckiest”
Southern Literary Festival
Christina Miles Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award
Belhaven College
Lea Schumacher Runner-up, Fiction: “The Weeping Wall”
Hollins University National Undergraduate Fiction Competition
Judged by Tony D’Souza (NEA and Guggenheim Fellow)

Publications
Ashlee Davidson “Apology to a Beggar Woman on the Steps of Notre Dame”
Poetry, Rumble (Issue #12)
Mandy McCullough Daily Devotional Entry
Accepted for Publication in Student to Student: A Guide to College Life, vol. 2 (forthcoming, Regal)
Lea Schumacher “Ophidiophobia”
Creative Nonfiction, The Distillery
Motlow State Community College

Scholarships, Graduate School, and Career
Mandy McCullough Internship, Mississippi Craft Center
Martha Krystaponis After-School Writing Workshop
Christina Miles Neighborhood Christian Center
Lea Schumacher

ACADEMIC YEAR 2007-2008

Awards
Andrew Hedglin First Place, Poetry: “Friendship 7”
Belhaven Award, Mississippi Poetry Society
Andrew Hedglin Third Place, Creative Nonfiction
“Taking the Cure So I Can Be Quiet”
Southern Literary Festival
Martha Krystaponis Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award
Belhaven College
Martha Krystaponis  First Place, Poetry: “Puzzle”
Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers

Martha Krystaponis  Third Place, Fiction: “A Fife Fishery”
Southern Literary Festival

Addie Leak  First Place, Creative Nonfiction: “The Luckiest”
Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers

Lea Schumacher  Third Place, Poetry: “Donut, also Doughnut, n.”
Belhaven Award, Mississippi Poetry Society

Publications

Martha Krystaponis “To Turn a Terrycloth Slipper into Glass”
Poetry, *Ruminate* (Issue #7)

Christina Miles “Catamaran 452” and “I Am Not a Doctor”
Poetry, *Cedarville Review*

Lea Schumacher “Seeing Red,”
Fiction, *Albion Review*

Rebecca Yantis “Do You Remember?” and “Mind of a Child”
Poetry, *Cedarville Review*

Scholarships, Graduate School, and Career

Addie Leak  $5,000 Fine Arts Scholarship
(Based on Creative Writing Submission)
Institute for the International Education of Students
Study in France, 2007/2008 Academic Year

Lea Schumacher  Internship (Fall 2008)
University Press of Mississippi

ACADEMIC YEAR 2006-2007

Awards

Andrew Hedglin  Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award
Belhaven College

Martha Krystaponis  Fifth Place, Poetry: “Tessie: Examinations of Belonging”
National Federation of State Poetry Societies

Addie Leak  Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award
Belhaven College

Addie Leak  Second Place, Poetry: “Lullaby of Leaves”
Southern Literary Festival

Publications

Martha Krystaponis “Tracing a Root to Lithuania”
Creative Nonfiction, *Ruminate* (Issue #5)
STUDENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Addie Leak “Letter to the Editor,” *Ruminate* (Fall 2007)
Stacy Nott “Letter to the Editor,” *Ruminate* (Spring 2007)

ACADEMIC YEAR 2005-2006

*Awards*

- **Nickie Albert**
  - Third Place, One-Act Play
  - “How Biddy Saved Gillian from the Hurricane”
  - Southern Literary Festival
- **Nickie Albert**
  - Second Place, Creative Nonfiction: “A Tattler’s Tale”
  - Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers
- **Andrew Hedglin**
  - Second Place, Fiction: “Under the Name of Saunders”
  - Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers
- **Cathy Karlak**
  - Elizabeth Spencer Creative Writing Award
  - Belhaven College
- **Cathy Karlak**
  - Third Place, Poetry: “Outages”
  - Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers

*Publications*

- **Sarah Bolton**
  - “Nana’s House”
  - Fiction, *Cedarville Review*
- **Andrew Hedglin**
  - “Matinee Mantra of H. G. Edgar Degas”
  - Poetry, *The Albion Review*
- **David Rahaim**
  - “Belhaven’s Creative Writing Program: One Year Strong”
  - Feature Article, *Belhaven Tartan*

ACADEMIC YEAR 2004-2005

*Awards*

- **Ian Bennett**
  - First Place, Fiction: “The Sable”
  - *Arrowhead* (Mississippi College)
- **Ian Bennett**
  - Second Place, Creative Nonfiction: “Black Tuesday”
  - *Arrowhead* (Mississippi College)
- **Skip Davis**
  - Second Place, One-Act Play: “Mr. Holloway’s Toy Company”
  - Southern Literary Festival
- **Sharmeisha Jordan**
  - Second Place, Poetry
  - Belhaven Award, Mississippi Poetry Society
- **David Rahaim**
  - First Place, Poetry: “Scottish Baptism” and “2:42 A.M.”
  - Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers
**THE BROGUE**

Jennifer Wells  
First Place, Creative Nonfiction  
“Near Death Valley”  
Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers

*Publications*

Ian Bennett  
“Black Tuesday,” Creative Nonfiction  
*Arrowhead* (Mississippi College)

Ian Bennett  
“The Sable,” Fiction  
*Arrowhead* (Mississippi College)

Sarah Bolton  
“The House of Bread”  
Fiction, *Spring Hill Review*

**ACADEMIC YEAR 2003-2004**

**Awards**

Philip Bassett  
First Place, Fiction  
Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers

Sarah Bolton  
First Place, Poetry: “Security”  
Belhaven Award, Mississippi Poetry Society

Jennifer Chajon  
First Place, Creative Nonfiction  
Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers

Roman Merry  
Honorable Mention, Poetry: “Prufock Creeps Creole”  
Southern Literary Festival

*Publications*

Trey Bruce  
“A Man and His Tusk”  
Poetry, *The Creative Spirit* (Belhaven College)

Jennifer Chajon  
“Illusion,” Creative Nonfiction  
*The Creative Spirit* (Belhaven College)

Jeremiah Maeda  
“Gods Without Earthly Desires”  
Poetry, *The Creative Spirit* (Belhaven College)

**ACADEMIC YEAR 2002-2003**

*Publications*

Claire Ferris  
“Pleni Sunt Coeli et Terra Gloria Tua” and “At Ten,” Poetry  
*The Creative Spirit* (Belhaven College)

Mickie Harwell  
“And the Beat Goes On,” Poetry  
*The Creative Spirit* (Belhaven College)

Cari Rittenhouse  
“Reach,” Poetry  
*The Creative Spirit* (Belhaven College)
If you would like to learn more about the BFA Degree in Creative Writing at Belhaven University, please contact the Chair of the Creative Writing Department:

Dr. Randall A. Smith
Belhaven University
Creative Writing Department
1500 Peachtree Street
Jackson, MS 39202

E-mail: rsmith@belhaven.edu
Phone: 601-968-8996

Visit the Creative Writing program on the web at
http://www.belhaven.edu/academics/Creative_writing/default.htm

If you would like to learn more about Belhaven University in general, please contact the Admission Department:

Office of Admission
Belhaven University, Box 153
1500 Peachtree Street
Jackson, MS 39202

Phone: 601-968-5940
Toll-free: 800-960-5940
Fax: 601-968-8946
E-mail: admission@belhaven.edu

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