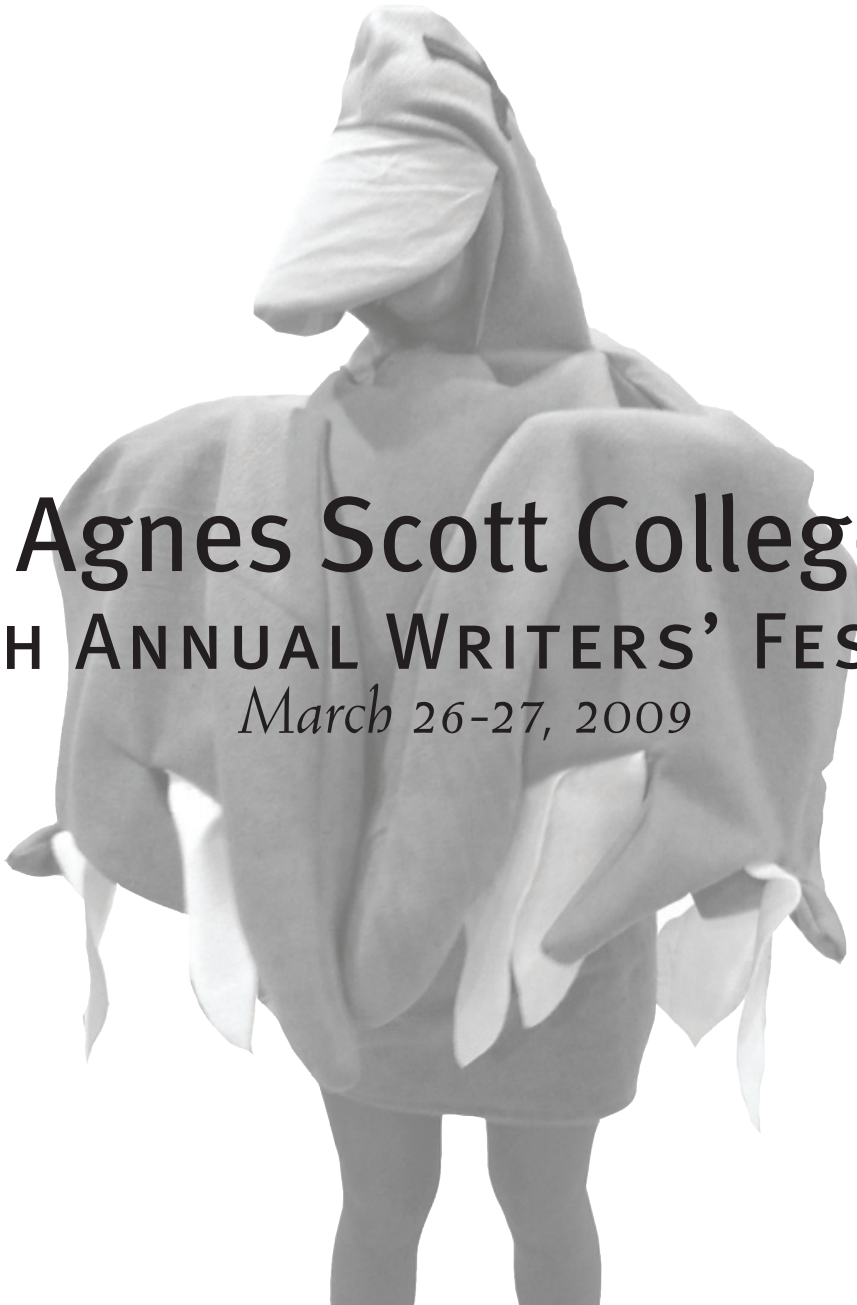

Agnes Scott College

38th Annual Writers' Festival

March 26-27, 2009

In memory of Bo Ball, 1937-2008

AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE
THE WORLD FOR WOMEN

Agnes Scott College
141 E. College Avenue
Decatur, GA 30030

March 2009

EDITOR: Professor Amber Dermont

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Fiction and One-Act Play: Jonathan Blum

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DESIGN AND PRODUCTION: Hadley Olson, Olivia White, Shannon Yarbrough

This year's Festival Magazine was inspired by the words, "postmodern," "animation," and "surrealism." The cover design—a collaborative effort on the part of Dana Design Group—uses an artistic and literary technique/game "Cadavre Exquis" or "Exquisite Corpse" invented by the Surrealists André Breton, Tristan Tzara, Paul Eluard and Benjamin Peret. Each designer added a new layer and level to the collective image within the sequence, concealed her image, and passed the design on to the next designer to make her contribution. The resulting collage is a celebration of the diverse literary voices the Festival welcomes to Agnes Scott College. The repeated image of the bird serves as a metaphor for travel, flight, borderless immigration, and as a reminder of the quill as a writing implement. Finally, as the Surrealist poet Joseph Delteil once wrote, "Alas! I believe in the virtue of birds. And a feather is all it takes to make me die laughing."

Send any correspondence or inquiry regarding the Writers' Festival Magazine to: Professor Amber Dermont, Department of English, Agnes Scott College, 141 E. College Avenue, Decatur, GA 30030-3770.

The Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival has been held annually since 1972. Its purpose is to bring nationally acclaimed writers to campus in an atmosphere of community with student writers from the colleges and universities of Georgia. While on campus our distinguished guests give public readings, award prizes in the Festival's statewide literary competition and conduct workshops for finalists in the competition. The guests for this year's Festival are Junot Díaz, Anita Desai, Quiara Alegría Hudes and Memye Curtis Tucker.

The Writers' Festival competition is open to anyone enrolled in a college or university in the state of Georgia. The works printed in this magazine have been selected by outside judges as finalist entries in the competition. The visiting writers make final decisions during the Festival, and a prize of $500 is given to the first place finalist in each contest category.

The Writers' Festival is made possible by the James T. and Ella Rather Kirk Fund. We wish to thank President Elizabeth Kiss, Dean of the College Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, Eleanor Hutchens '40, and the estate of Margret Trotter for their support. We also thank Professor Rachel Trousdale for organizing and overseeing the Writers' Festival Contest, Professor Nell Ruby for supervising and inspiring Dana Design, Professor Peggy Thompson for her support and our outside selection committee for their time and careful reading.

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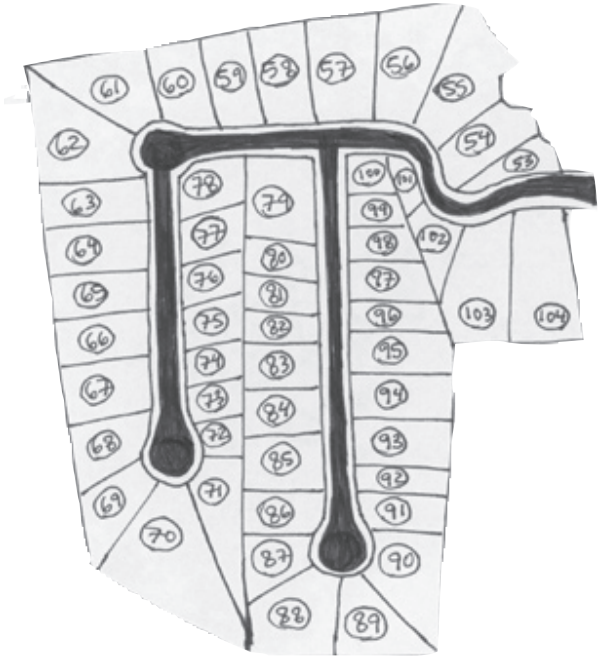


Poetry

Jes Gearing
Two-Four Time

Twenty years old and one year married,
you took a job at the local bakery,
planted your feet at the mixer ten hours a day
and arced your back to its cold steel bowl.

Hands working the dough, you kneaded each ball
into tight, smooth loaves, punctuating
every punch and stretch by the soft two-four time
of *Swing low, sweet chariot* hummed above the whirring whisk.

But late at night, when the television
was turned down low, when your husband shifted
his weight to the left of the bed, leaving you to listen
to the neighborhood drunk stumble by the window,

you walked to your kitchen and turned on the light.
Standing again at the mixer, you cracked
two eggs, then measured one cup of sugar,
one and three-quarter cups of flour.

Preheating the oven, you beat the batter toward dawn
and filed away exhaustion in the recipe of your memory.

Sarah Hughes
Parent-Teacher Conference

When the mother finally says about her kid,
Someone touched her, down there,
I think of the playground the day before –
how I'd pushed the child out of my lap,
slapped away the gnats, then walked
to the class's garden to inspect our budding
tomatoes, each one the size of a marble.
Overnight, the plant had turned to lace—
leaves like doilies from stem to stem.
A tomato worm fat as a thumb skulked
along a vine. I plucked the worm, placed
it in a Mason jar on the science shelf.
All afternoon that worm gorged itself.

Elaine Koutroulias
Science Science

What is *science*?
In the name of science
I ask you,
should not scientific scientists
be scandalized no more?
Statistically science is yet
discovered. Most often on a
Thursday I science while
sizing the curious quizzical silence
of science.
Finally! A cure for science!
Soon we'll have this science
back on its feet
(and it is always on its feet).
Sometimes, I scheme I am a science,
strategically sighing and reinventing
persistence. I science a
distance; science lists it
and sends it back
to science,
who senses inconsistence,
leading always back
to science. Since then,
science has never been the same.

Simon Kress
Metamorphosen

I. *Paradise*

She is in paradise. And that is a load off.
Paradise, they say, is far better than this,
And this is so-so stuff. But, at the close,

Did bliss descend or did she pursue it?
What to make of her deserted palm
Encircling still a pear's delicate globe?

II. *Molehill*

A mountain is another name for a mound,
A mound another name for a molehill.
How easy it is to make one of the other.

Yet how hard it is the other way around:
To think anything less, when salad tongs
Clatter, her cellist hand shrinks to a fist.

III. *Fish*

A lover is a fish: she must have her way,
Plunging from slack to tug until the barb
Pricks her throat. Any good angler knows.

But what then of this shimmering catch?
The careful barb, palm, and gulping cheek,
One's own blood blossoming like a polyp?

Nick McRae

Something Else

for Bri Cavallaro

Something else, my grandmother said,
as in, *those boys down by the creek are*

something else or *Reverend, that sermon*
was something else, and I couldn't stop

thinking that it was our fault: the bees
now distant, as though they had lumbered

across the cold shallows of Styx, shaking
their fur for the boatman dozing at the rudder.

Later, when scientists offered an explanation,
disease of bees on a biblical scale, the Reverend

offered his prayer to the black flecks of a failing
sky, pollen sacs laden and glistening. Somehow

we knew it was something else entirely,
warm, measurable as honey—the flowers

by the walkway straining toward each other
though they just couldn't reach.

Molly Saunders
Anna Karenina Goes Naked

I.
What bothers Vronsky most
is that she never removes all
her clothing at once.
Her body, to his mind,
is a patchwork puzzle.
A breast here, a knee there—
such sumptuous elbows
have never existed.
They live in Russia of course,
so that's something,
and their story is always winter.
But he thinks, when he thinks,
that it's more than just cold.

II.
Anna always thinks.
Sin, adultery, these are words
they do not speak
in their snatched society moments.
But such words are heavy,
presence staining the air.
Bare shouldered,
trembling with such wanting,
Anna is naked enough.
She makes silent barters.
For each *vershok* covered,
one year less fiery torment—
but what use are years
against the mouth of eternity?

III.
Vronsky outlines that enigmatic smile
with one pearlescent finger
a gentleman to his extremities.
She is not like other love affairs—
that black cat velvet dress,
what it covers:
her mysterious unified whole.
Anna's eyes smolder and burn,
her opera diamonds chokehold
the slender extension of neck—
harsh glitter in winter starlight.

Austin Segrest

Heany and Rick

after reading District and Circle

Nosing duct-taped dictionaries to trace
the roots of work's heavy words, like *harrow-pin*,
furl, and *ruck*, I feel a shooting pain,
go knee to groin and ground in the spine's base.

Head-banged spikes…I'm bent over the book,
knees braced, as if to tug the stubborn stump
of a claw-sunk mimosa—but stop.
Can't get any *purchase* when I look

up words that bend the steel of Latin's plow
and break Greek's gilded axle. This is the dark
down in the ditch, the rocky muck, the dreck
old Rick set me to drudge when I was how

old? Twenty? Sinew-muscled in the mire
of sweat-made mud, I heaved the mattock's claw
above my head and threw it down in clay,
my lower back a lever – hinge and wire.

The body reminds the body of its own
disrepair, the disuse of its blade—
I hear it in the string of pops unraveled
between my hips, uprooting in the bone.

Late light slipping, Rick, on bolted knees,
went pacing either side of what I'd dug,
gumming tobacco, singing to his dog,
"Abigail, sweet Abigail…" His wheeze

of song my praise, I watched the running ground
darken as we pulled away. The truck
bed's bounce passed through my body's tuning fork,
a humming in the limbs like I'd been found.

Cheryl Stiles
No Anointing

I.

A gospel of new tongues—
ahhh-eeee, ta-so-so, ahhh-eeee.
In the Church of Jesus Christ

With All These Signs to Follow, I have felt
the Holy Ghost come through me,
speak through me—

ma-ree, maa-tha, so-ta-lee—and it was good.
His Spirit working me
from the top of my head down to my bare feet.

The Bible says not one sign
but all these signs shall follow.
They will speak in new tongues.

They will pick up serpents—
timber rattler, diamondback, canebrake.
If they drink any deadly thing—
strychnine, lye water, white lightning,
kerosene, gasoline—
it will not hurt them. They will lay

their hands on the sick—the cankor-ridden, the disease-
stricken, all those who are downtrodden
with ills, and they will recover.

II.

That night I saw sheet lightning on the horizon
then a streak of lightning split the big oak,
sent sparks flying and smoke rising.

Thunder shook the tin roof, rattled the doorframe
of our house,
swung that string light bulb

in the kitchen back and forth like a pendulum.
I knew then
my crazy old man was planning something.

Dirt drunk on beer and Jack, he stormed through
the front screen door,
gun in one hand. With the other hand

he grabbed my neck, said,
"Got something
for you to see in the yard. It's out back."

He drug me through the mud to the henhouse,
that old chicken-coop
turned into a snake shack.

I saw the locked boxes of serpents,
stacked two and three tall,
all labeled after the names of the devil—

Satan, Beelzebub, Belial—and all the places
of hell—Gehenna
and the valley of Hinnom.

He cocked the hammer, put the gun to my head.
He unlocked the grate, opened
a box and yelled, "You come here, come."

"Put your hand in, whore, put your goddamn hand in."
I have been here before
many times—at least in certain dreams.

I am bruised, skin bluing, blood stained
on my clothes, my neck and arms.
I have often prayed for a *special* dream,

a dream like a divining rod, that wooded Y,
witch hazel, pointing
me toward an odd path I must travel.

Early on I learned the old arts, medicine-making
from black walnut hulls and bitter roots,
soapmaking from lye. My fingers

cracked and callused from stitching quilts
with womenfolk. I studied
the art of how to prophesy.

III.

And in that special dream that had finally come,
the spirit flowed upon me, showed me
a cord—not rope, not twine, but electric,

plugged into a live outlet on one end but loose on the other,
its edges frayed, raw and exposed,
lying on the henhouse floor like discarded yarn

or string, looking just like any ordinary thing.
Now, drunk and staggering, he said again,
"Put your hand in."

With the strength of many women, like revenants and kin,
otherworldly, I turned, knocked him
flat on the ground, onto that cord.

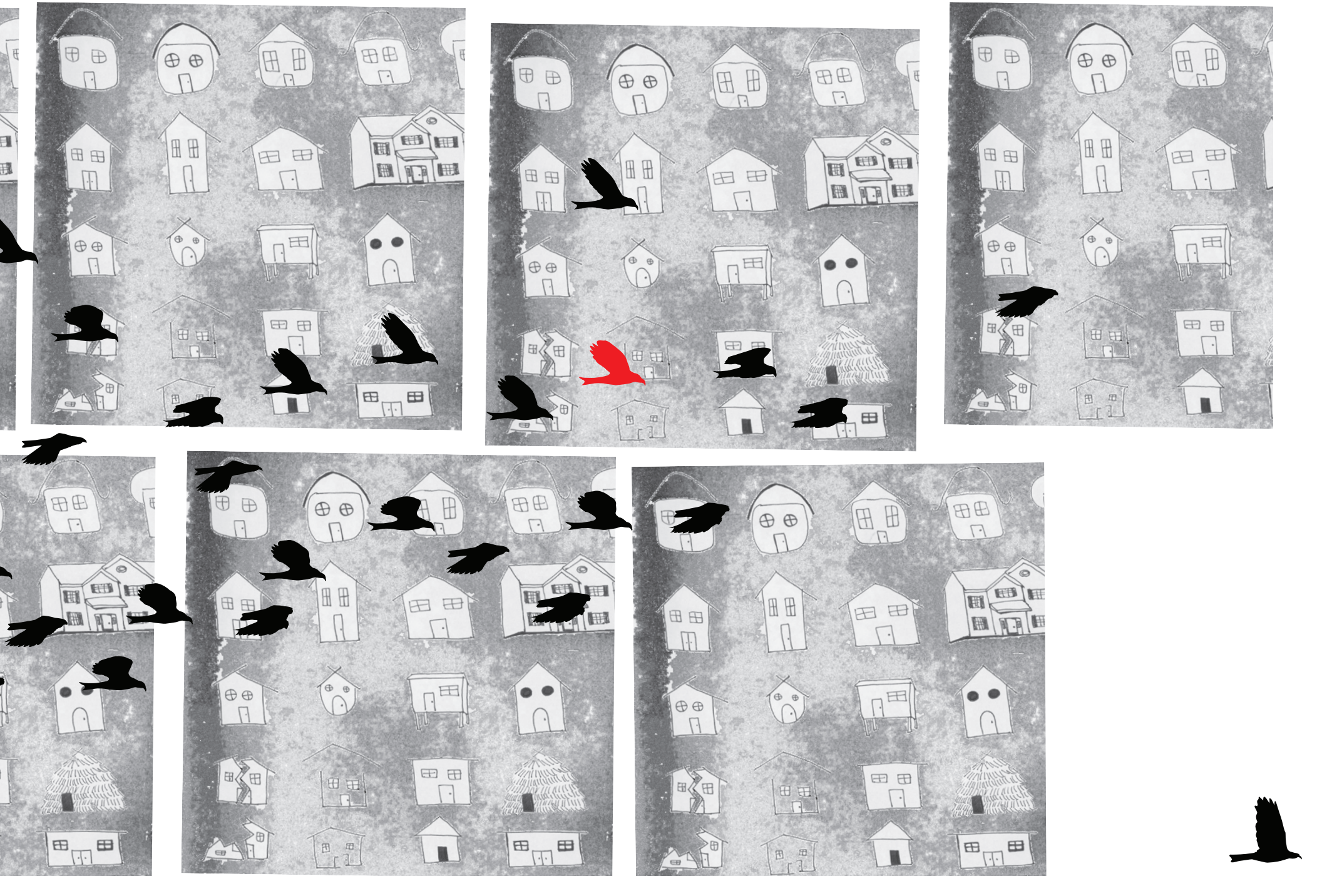
And the fourth angel poured out a vial upon the sun.
The power almost split his skull.
Sparks flew from the barrel of the gun,
and *his feet were as if they were burned in a furnace.*
On his *body a noisome and grievous sore* appeared
and his mouth melted shut, forever sealed.

A gospel of new tongues—*ahhh-eeee, ta-so-so, ahhh-eee*—
the serpent always meaner
when no anointing comes.



Fiction





Kevin Adler

The Lake In Winter

1

In the fall before the Gunnells moved to Florida and Old Woody Eustis was hit and killed on Eagle Lake, the parents agreed to a final pancake breakfast with their two sons at the family's lake house. To placate his younger brother, Nate fixed the ceremonial blueberry pancakes and farm bacon, and despite the remnants of the evening's chill, the family of four sat stoically at the picnic table on the screened back porch. Below, the mottled reflection of red and orange leaves on the tree crowns glimmered in scattered constellations on the lake's surface.

•

The father ate quickly and unceremoniously, his mind fixed on the details of the journey that lie ahead for him and his wife. Opposite his father, Max, the youngest at 31, had flooded his plate with syrup. He then proceeded to make a spectacle of mashing the pancake stack into the syrup until it formed a starchy soup, which he spooned sluggishly to his mouth. The father, having already abandoned his sons to their fate, refused to raise an eyebrow to the behavior. In fact, although the sun had hardly risen, his eyes were entirely concealed by a pair of mirrored sunglasses.

•

When the family was finished, Mrs. Gunnell rose from her place and collected the empty plates. Meanwhile, Mr. Gunnell took loud slurps of his coffee from a thick porcelain mug. It was a noise that had always inordinately agitated the youngest son, and once his mother had returned for his plate, Max left the table and withdrew to the attached garage. Inside the garage sat the new snowmobile his brother had recently bought for him. Though bought used, it was an expensive model, and in order to pay for it Nate used a share of the money their father had instructed him to think of as an advance on the brothers' collective inheritance.

2

Mr. Gunnell had always worn the mirrored sunglasses, so that when Max thought of his father, the image that often came to mind was no more than a convex silvered reflection of himself.

•

When Max was young, Mr. Gunnell strung a doe from the rafters of the garage to bleed it safely from the coyotes. It hung there for days, the blood sponging into to the dirt floor. The boys were told not to go inside while it was there, but when young Max heard his father yelling inside the garage one morning, he went in. The weather had been unseasonably warm and the carcass had spoiled as a result. Inside, Max vomited from the stench. After he'd finished, he looked up at his father and saw only the contorted features of his own face in his father's glasses.

•

That afternoon Mr. Gunnell dragged the carcass into the woods behind the house for the coyote pack. At night, the boys listened to the fits of snarling and somber howls that carried clear across the lake. In the days that followed, many of the neighborhood parents refused to let their children outside, even during daylight.

3

The engine of the older Gunnells' newly purchased RV was running before the breakfast dishes were dry. Outside, Nate helped his mother from the passenger side step onto the beaded bucket seat. She had the compact, squat build Nate considered his misfortune. Max, however, was leaner than his brother, and had inherited the gaunt frame and taciturn features of his father.

•

"Should I go get him?" Nate asked.

Mrs. Gunnell rocked in her seat, distributing the balance of her girth. "No. If this is how he wants it, this is how it'll be. He's your responsibility now."

"I know."

"And remember to make the money last between the both of you."

•

Mr. Gunnell fastened his seat belt and shut his door. "Good luck son," he said from across the cab. "You know how to reach us."

"Do you have an address?"

"We'll let you know."

4

After they sold the year-round home in Damariscotta for a profit to a couple from Massachusetts, the Gunnells abandoned the pretense that vacationing in the South was an escape from the hazards of Northern winters and the discomfort of arthritic bones. "Frankly," they later told their oldest son, "we owe it to ourselves." Nate received a modest portion of the money from the sale on the condition that he promised to take care of his brother and winterize the lake house, which meant removing the rodent-infested insulation and patching cracks in the bent floorboards, among other projects.

•

Soon the ground froze. Then the lake. And winter set in. Now and then, the brothers had company. Mostly it was Jessica, a kind and attractive woman who had known Nate since childhood. She often drove in from town to have dinner with them and sometimes came in the afternoon to watch ball games beforehand. Eventually, she was staying overnight with them.

•

That winter, Jessica stood twirling her hair at the picture window overlooking the lake.

"Old Woody Eustis is out there walking," she said to Nate.

"He'd probably be swimming if it wasn't frozen."

Jessica turned to smile at him. "He's just in his flannels. No hat or gloves."

"If he could hold his breath long enough he'd probably swim shore to shore underneath the ice."

"That's what Joe used to say."

"Did he?"

"He said it was easy to tell when the lake thawed in spring 'cause the first thing you'd hear that morning was his father jumping in it."

"Oh yeah?"

"And you knew when it was frozen again in the fall, 'cause you'd notice the splash was missing."

5

With his parents gone and Nate with Jessica, Max spent many days alone in the garage, tinkering with the odd assortment of tools accumulated by generations of Gunnells before him, applying them variously to the new machine.

•

Once, over a period of several days, he managed to disassemble it entirely, engine and all. He was meticulous in his arrangement of the parts on the floor, ritualistic almost, as if he were following some private and sacred system of logic. Once finished, he studied the floor with admiration before undertaking the process of fitting the parts back together. He had a talent with machines, some said. "He is a machine," his father said. "There's no reason, no emotion in him. He just runs."

•

Max came out of the garage for meals. He'd grab a hot plate from his brother and bring it back into the garage. When the temperature dropped, Nate set up a space heater to keep him warm, a tapered metal

cone that looked like a jet engine. It glowed red hot and blasted dry air that smelled like burnt coins. At night, while Nate and his girlfriend were in the bedroom, Max aimed the heater at the front of the snowmobile and set it on high, gripping the handlebars as the hot air blew wildly through his hair and tickled his neck.

6

Sometimes while Nate was cooking dinner Jessica visited Max in the garage. She'd ask him about the snowmobile, when they might take it out together. She sat on it, flipping her thick curls over her shoulder when the space heater kicked on. She asked Max about the choke and the throttle, and when he tried to answer she giggled and called him a know-it-all.

•

"I think you need a haircut," said Jessica. She uncovered a wooden stool from a corner of the garage and directed him to sit still on it. Soon she came back from the house with a pair of scissors and a towel. Max sat motionless as her breasts grazed his shoulder, her pelvis nudged his knee. "I want you to look good," she said. "One day maybe you'll leave this place and catch someone's eye. Not tonight, though, 'cause it's supposed to snow."

•

Max couldn't control his heart.

7

That evening, after dinner, Nate went to the garage to check on his brother. Max was on the snowmobile.

"Jessica and I are going to be rearranging some furniture in the bedroom," he told him.

Jessica snickered somewhere in the background.

"So if you hear anything don't worry, it's nothing."

Max nodded.

"Okay?"

"Okay."

•

Later, when Max opened the door to his brother's bedroom, Jessica screamed and pulled frantically at the sheets to cover herself, but Max didn't budge from the doorway.

"Nate DO SOMETHING!"

Max stood still, staring blankly at Jessica's back, her shoulders bare and pale.

Nate rolled to his side and blew the candle on the nightstand. "Go to the garage for now," he told his brother.

•

"He just stood there, staring. Like a dog or something."

Nate sat on the edge of the bed and tied the laces of his boots.

"How could he not know what's right and what's wrong?"

"Maybe you ought to go home," said Nate. "Just for tonight."

"But it's already snowing."

"Just for tonight."

She looked at him silently, buttoned her blouse, and left.

8

In the garage, Max was straddled atop the snowmobile and browsing the outdated, mold-ridden magazines. He'd set the radio on the workbench to the AM oldies station whose DJ played *The Flamingos*, Big Bopper, and Eddie Cochran. Max put the helmet between his legs and slapped the top of it, off-rhythm.

•

Outside, the snow was falling. It was the first storm of the year. Fourteen inches was predicted by the following evening. "Perfect powder," the DJ said. "The kind you've been dreaming about."

•

Nate opened the garage door from the foyer. He stood with the dishtowel slung over his shoulder, watching his brother. When Max saw him, he stopped drumming. They looked at each other and when it was clear Nate wasn't angry about his walking in, an expectant gleam grew in Max's eyes.

"Well. What do you say? You want to take her out tonight?"

"M'm, h'm."

Nate almost smiled.

"Let me get the gear together. We'll give her a test run before the others spoil the powder."

Max nodded.

"You'll stay right up alongside me?"

He nodded again.

"Alright then."

9

Nate arranged the two machines—his father's old two-stroke and Max's newer model—just off shore from where the dock was anchored in the summer.

"Take this pack with you and zip your parka before the insides get wet."

Max slipped an arm through the strap of the pack but couldn't reach back to get the other. Nate helped to guide the arm through.

"We'll go straight across the lake, slice the middle. Just keep next to me and you'll see how to open her up."

•

Max tinkered with the throttle.

"And quit messing with that or you'll flood her. That or you'll make us both sick from the fumes."

They pulled their helmets down and flipped the headlights on. Nate turned the ignition on his machine, and signaled Max to follow.

•

They rode parallel over the lake, casting their headlights onto the falling flakes and the shimmering surface of snow. Yet always just beyond the reach of their beams, was an impervious darkness. As if the lake were endless, shoreless. As they rode, Max edged occasionally ahead of his brother, and Nate didn't try to stop him. It was a nice night to ride.

10

They stopped somewhere near the far shore and stood in the snow and stretched their legs. Nate took his helmet off and in the silence of the night he felt the engine hum like a phantom limb. He walked through the powder, insulated by his boots and bibs to the wet and cold. The snow fell diagonally now across the headlights of Max's machine.

•

"You'd better turn those off," said Nate.

Max trudged back to the machine and turned the lights off. The brothers stood in the near black night, the moonlight only a smudged white bloom behind the clouds. Nate reached into an inner pocket and removed a silver flask. He took a swig for himself and offered one to Max, who declined.

"You don't seem too excited," he said. "What's a matter, don't you like the ride?

Max kicked at the snow.

"Or you want to go faster."

Max looked up.

"Faster it is."

•

Max was already on the machine. The engine was idling but lights were off. Nate took another swig from the flask and put his helmet back on.

Max revved the engine.

"Easy with that," Nate warned, though he knew Max couldn't hear him through the helmet.

Max revved it higher.

"Hey!"

Nate paused to be sure his brother understood, but once he turned his back Max charged it up so high it whined like a whipped mule. Nate had thrown his helmet off and taken a few steps toward Max when Max engaged the clutch. The jolt nearly bucked him off.

"Goddammit Max now just wait a goddamned minute." He grabbed his brother by the scruff of his parka and tried to pry him from the handlebars, but Max had reengaged and he took off into the dark.

Nate knew by the pitch of the engine that it would be tough to catch up to him, and while his brother had been facing the right direction, he would eventually have to stop, or else be stopped by the shore, or the trees beyond the shore. The only thing to do was try to track him down and hope he had the sense to stop himself or turn the lights on.

11

When Nate caught up with his brother he was standing in front of his machine with Old Woody Eustis splayed out on the lake before him.

•

The brothers stood over the old man. He was on his back, making a low moan. His legs were curled awkwardly to one side, formless as sacks of beans. The jeans were caked in blood. Already, the blood had formed a dark halo in the snow around him. A few yards away, the lights from Max's machine fell on the webbing of a snowshoe that had punctured the snow at an angle.

•

"Jesus, Max."

Max stood over the old man with his arms limp at his sides.

"What the hell were you doing? Didn't you see him?" Nate asked a series of rhetorical questions in quick succession. He paced a creaking path in the snow near Woody Eustis, looking alternately at the old man and his brother. He was sweating and he could hear himself breathing, in and out, though he felt he was suffocating. He looked down to Old Woody Eustis. He was wearing a dark wool coat, dark jeans, and gaiters. No reflective gear.

Nate now worked a circle around the old man and the snowmobile. He saw the dim ray of a dying flashlight a short distance off, and next to it the second snowshoe. He brought both items back in his arm and placed them on the ground next to the old man. Nate knelt near his frosted face and spoke to him:

"It's going to be alright, Old Woody. We'll take care of you and everything will be fine as fur."

Old Woody just moaned.

12

Nate left his brother alone with Old Woody Eustis, and rode back to the lake house for a plastic sled. Max stood beside the wrecked snowmobile, cradling his helmet under his arm. His hair was matted with sweat and steaming. He looked at the machine. The windshield was shattered. A side panel hung like a broken wing by a thread of fiberglass. One of the skis had nearly snapped in two, and he knew from the smell of gasoline

that the engine had flooded.

•

Max turned the headlight off, as his brother had told him to do, and used the flashlight instead. Eventually they'd have to hide the snowmobile, Nate had said. Max climbed on the saddle, shined the flashlight on the kill switch and depressed it. He walked around to the front and tore back the panel. In his backpack he found a wrench, and tried it on the spark plug. It came off easily. He untucked a piece of flannel from his pants and made a run over the contact, then slipped the plug into a zippered pocket.

•

Max pulled the starter chord twice. Gas shot from the chamber. He thought he heard it land in the snow, but when he pulled again nothing came out. He took the plug from his pocket and fit it back in tight, first with his hands, then with the wrench. It started up clean, and he let it run.

13

Old Woody was murmuring again.

Max tried to ignore it. He sat on the saddle in the dark waiting for his brother. Way off on shore he thought he saw a house light turn on, but couldn't decide if it'd been there all along. In his mind he still heard the guitar riff from the Eddie Cochran song, "Summertime Blues." He drummed on the sideboard over the sound of Old Woody's murmuring.

I'm a'gonna raise a fuss I'm a'gonna raise a holler.
About a'workin' all summer just to try to raise a dollar.

•

Whenever he paused, though, he heard the old man's groans again. Max walked over to Old Woody and shined the flashlight on him. His eyes were wide and watery. Max scooped up a handful of snow and tried to feed it to him, but he coughed and spat it out red. Max looked toward shore for the lights of his brother's machine but there was no sign of him. He wondered how much it would snow that night, if it would snow enough to cover up everything and everyone. Sometimes, when it was cold and it snowed and there was no wind at all, you could hear the snow fall, and you were warm in a way.

•

"Get away from him," Nate said when he'd returned with the sled. After he'd untied it, he arranged the sled by the old man's side and he and Max hooked their wrists under his armpits and hoisted him onto it. When Nate noticed one of Old Woody's boots hanging slightly off the sled, he grabbed the ankle and lifted it back onto the sled. Once he let go of it, he nearly gagged.

"I'm bringing him back to Joe and Tiffany's and explain how we found him run over," he said. "When I take off, you're going to ride your sled over to the old stables. Keep your lights off and stay right of the moon. I know it's not bright but keep the lights off the whole way. Use the flashlight if you have to, but keep the headlights off."

"Understand?"

14

It used to be, when all the families who lived on the lake gathered for the Fourth of July, Woody Eustis was the one who took responsibility for the clam bake, tending vigilantly to the layers of seaweed and shellfish. Young Max was sometimes his assistant, and it was Old Woody's habit to collect the discarded lobster parts from those who lacked the stomach or patience to dissect them. Max received a quarter from Old Woody for each head collected.

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When the others had finished their dinners and gone down to the beach for the fireworks, Max went back with Old Woody to the Eustis kitchen carting the plastic bag of lobster heads. They covered the dining room table with a plastic cloth, and set out three ceramic bowls to separate the meat, tamale, and shells.

•

They worked at the bodies until late in the evening, even after Woody's son Joe had returned and gone to bed. It was after midnight when Old Woody arranged several slices of bread on a cookie sheet. He uncorked a bottle of Riunite, handed a small juice glass to Max and told him it was time for a snack. When the bread came out of the oven, it was crisp and browned. They took a butter knife to the bowl of green tamale and ate until it was gone. Max spent all the next day and the one after it in the bathroom.

15

Joe came running down the outside stairs kicking up the freshly fallen powder. He and Nate hauled Joe's father, still on the sled, back up the stairs and into the small apartment Joe had built for his family above Old Woody's garage. They set the sled down on the kitchen floor, flooding it with snow and blood. Joe's wife Tiffany had already called for an ambulance. She stood with her thin nostrils flared, gripping the edge of the counter as her husband grabbed the phone to call for a plow. Nate grabbed the kitchen towels from the refrigerator door and tried to cover the worst part of Woody's legs.

•

"I don't know what more to do," said Nate.

"You've done enough," said Tiffany, shifting her demeanor almost instantly. She skirted across the kitchen, averting her eyes from her father-in-law, and gave Nate a brief but firm hug. Nate felt she was pregnant again. When she released him, her arm grazed his face and although he was unshaven he could feel how smooth her skin was. Joe Eustis was a lucky man, Nate knew, with his good looks, his beautiful wife, and his kids. One of them, their daughter Mary, a toddler, had just peered around the doorway into the kitchen. Nate heard the television from the den blasting what sounded to be a car race. Her eyes were bleary and before she could take in the scene, her mother ushered her back into the room and closed the door.

•

"Did you see anyone else when you were out there?" Joe asked.

"No. No one. We were watching the race in the house and we heard someone fire up the sled. I went out to the garage and it was already gone. So I followed the tracks to the lake, and that's when I found your dad."

"Huh."

"I had to go back and tell Max and pick up the sled, and that's about all."

16

At the far side of the lake, behind a hedged fence that bordered the lake, Max knelt in a drift of snow. He'd parked the battered snowmobile inside the old stable further down the shore. There was still a bail of dry hay inside and, even frozen, the smell was enough to remind him of summer. Crouched in the snowdrift now, he looked again through an opening in the hedge for sign of his brother coming to pick him up.

•

Soon the snow had covered the ridged impressions of the snowmobile tracks where Max had run over a fishing flag. Even he knew there'd been no fish in the lake since three years ago when the community was hit with so much snow and dark weather they'd hardly seen the sun for months. Nothing about the winters had improved in the years that followed. The lack of sunlight killed the weeds and grass on the lake's bottom, which then depleted the oxygen and killed off the fish. Nate had said it would be years before fish could winter-over again, no matter how many the state stocked it with every spring. It was all just wasted money.

•

Max couldn't remember what was supposed to happen. Whether his brother was going to come for him, whether he was supposed to be

hiding or simply waiting. The snow was thick and wet and he smelled the damp wool of his sweater rising up through the neck of the parka whenever he adjusted himself. His toes were numb and he felt sick like he needed to use a bathroom, but it was too cold to go all the way back to the barn. He thought of Old Woody, his legs dead and formless as bean sacks, and it only made him feel worse. When he couldn't hold it any longer, he relaxed his bowels, and it was such a relief to his mind he felt he might cry. He stayed where he was, squatting in his soiled bibs and closed his eyes. He wrapped his arms around his knees, tucked his head in between his legs, and lay that way until he drifted off to sleep.

Karen Gentry

The Forgiveness Project

An inconvenience of dying: My life is unraveling to its end like a story and the characters I've been thrown with for these forty-three years now seek closure from me. Some of them have been minor antagonists. I'm thinking here of my ex-husband. We met at Georgetown. I was studying law, on a break from working on the unsuccessful presidential primary campaign of Ben Fernandez. A good man. It seems that's been my life's specialty, losing campaigns. Back then I thought I might learn how to avoid losing in law school. My ex-husband, who was not a good man, was studying statistics. He interrupted my nap last Saturday to call and tell me that he's still in academia, specializing in a field he's pioneered—math justice.

When I asked him what the hell math justice was, he took a big phone breath in my ear and said, "It's the study of how students who are constructed outside the White, Christian, heterosexual male bourgeois privilege successfully accommodate, reconfigure, or resist the hegemonic mathematical discourses of schooling and of society generally."

I stopped him. "Lewis, are you reading that from something?"

My ex-husband was indignant. "No, Caroline, I'm not."

It was the same tone he'd used when he'd denied, fifteen years ago, that he was sleeping with an undergraduate named Jill Ahn Yo. (I figure if I'm dying I might as well use full names.) "No, Caroline, I'm not."

When I reminded him of this coincidence, he said it was a nice segue into the reason for his call. He'd heard from a friend of a friend that I was given no more than a few weeks at best and before I crossed over the final divide, he wanted me to forgive him for cheating. By way of explanation for his adultery he said, "I was a product of my own patriarchal upbringing." That was his apology. And you know what I said to him? "I'm a product of my upbringing too." Which is true. "And the answer is no, asshole."

The major antagonists: Of course, my small family, a brother and a mother. I haven't the time to sketch them in full. Of my mother, it's enough to know that she was a thin-shelled egg. As for my brother, he came along after me, cracked in her image. I knew it even as a small girl, living so close together as we did in our two-bedroom house along a narrow strand of the Intracoastal Waterway in South Florida. My mother had the kind of near-beauty that made her susceptible to men. She had most of the pieces—blonde hair, the right kind of body, nice legs—but not all of them—a constellation of pock marks that left red tracks underneath her eyes, a set of crowded teeth.

Of our father, she would smile and tell us fairy tales. He was a snowbird from Canada, one of the waves of Ontarians who flood the region from November to March. When he met her, he fell instantly in love. He stayed past the season, took up a steady job tending the drawbridge in town. After a year, he bought her a home at the end of the bridge and they had me, and then two years later, my brother came crying into this world. My father didn't stick around to see him crawl, but to hear my mother tell it, there was no reason for him to go. I have searched in the U.S. and in Canada, and the only record I ever found with the name he gave her was in Florida, where a formal complaint was lodged against him by a group of local boaters who said my father was "stingy" with raising the bridge. As a little girl, I did not know my mother's job had once been his. I only knew that she raised and lowered the Tropical Boulevard Bridge every day on the half hour from nine to four and just about any other time the boaters asked her to.

Perhaps, for some characters a sketch is not enough: It was my mother who opened our door to whoever knocked. Not a bit of caution in her. Strangers spent nights on our couch, our house by the bridge a well-known stopping place for those passing through. In the first grade, I overheard my teacher call it "The Drift Inn." The teacher, my mother said, had never been a good person. "Like a snake." Still, the snake was right. When I was seven, my mother let a bum heading north to Cape Cod, drift in and stay with us until spring broke in New England. When he left,

he took my bike with him, a brand new banana-seater. The next year, a runaway from Jacksonville, a girl only a few years older than me, found her way to our house via the St. John's River and spent all winter drifting in and out, leaving the door open and dropping apple snails on the floor wherever she went. My mother thought our guests' quirks were charming. "She's like a tropical Gretel spreading breadcrumbs!"

This was the only rule in our house: no one was turned away. The summer I turned sixteen, my mother permitted a pair of horny deep sea fishermen who'd capsized off the coast to sleep head to foot, foot to head, on our couch. She said they were "Like the Swiss Family Robinson." These days my mother would have been featured on the bad parenting segment of the local news. No husband. Fatherless kids running wild. The harboring of runaways. Strangers, no doubt many of them felons, sleeping under her roof. But back then people generally minded their own business. Politics was local. Stories began and ended at home.

Things I should have recognized as foreshadowing: I've always felt something pressing down on my chest. A cancer now, the size of a grapefruit my doctor says, but as a girl, I thought of it as a foot, stepping on me the nights my mother slipped out. I was left to manage my brother, to keep the visitors from touching our things while my mother roamed the beach in search of sea turtles to save. Even now, I resent the melodrama of these two scenes put together—me and my brother alone and my mother on the beach saving someone else's kids. Depending on the season, she was either hiding nests from poachers and raccoons or helping the hatchlings make it down to the waves.

Places have a way of returning in a story: It was on that beach in May of 1979 that my mother ran into Augie Lester, a man who had stopped by our house earlier in the evening. I was home for the summer, my first year of college complete. When I cracked open the door Augie Lester squeezed his face in the opening. He had a head like a pineapple, prickly and fat on the bottom, a narrow forehead topped by a tuft of spiked hair.

"Are you Juanita?"

Juanita, that was my mother's name. He had mistaken me for her.

There have been some lines of dialogue that could have been better: "Yeah, I am she," I said. What I wanted to say was, "You can tell your friends that the Drift Inn is closed." I did manage to pull the door shut and lock it. That's true. It is also true that after cursing me and calling me an "ugly runt," Augie Lester headed east, with plans to camp on the beach. In these forty-three years there have been scenes where everything has come together. Here's a real heart-breaker: Before Augie Lester shot my mother execution-style on the beach, she spit blood and one crown in the sand, a silver amalgam, and she cried, "I forgive you and God will too."

There are bitter ironies: Like when my brother called me last week to tell me that Augie Lester, who is now dying too, wants my forgiveness. My brother doesn't see it, but I think most people would find that ironic. A judge granted Augie mercy-release from prison and he's living with his great-niece-in-law in Port Saint Lucie, Florida. This great-niece contacted someone at an organization called The Forgiveness Project and a Forgiveness Project coordinator called me at work and when I didn't return the voicemail messages she'd left me because I've been busy dying from home, she phoned my brother. The Forgiveness Project has helped "hundreds of people live with the people they've killed." As I live and breathe that's an exact quote from their website, a losing campaign slogan if I ever heard one. Here's a better slogan, the second half, compliments of my brother: "Augie Lester has lived his whole life, *but to make his life whole he needs my forgiveness*."

My brother is a real cheerleader for this kind of self-effacing forgiveness. He's been robocalling me over the past week, hammering home the same message: "Forgiveness is good for the soul of the forgiven and the forgiver." I've always hated the phone as a means of persuasion. When I work with candidates, I encourage them to talk to their constituents in person. It takes longer, and, if my track record is a

measure, it's a sure way to lose an election. Still, avoiding an eye-to-eye conversation is, I think, a sign of weakness.

When the robocall tactic didn't work, my brother resorted to begging in person. "Please let me take you down there, Sis." I have asked him not to call me "Sis," but it does no good. There was a time when my brother did whatever I said. But after my mother died and I had to put college on hold until he turned eighteen, he drifted away from me, following anyone at his high school who showed an interest in him—mostly the white supremacists and kids from the Church of the Nazarene. There was a time there when I thought he might go either way—skinheads or the Nazarenes. I suppose I should be thankful that he chose the Nazarenes. His wife, a top-dog Nazarene, has called me twice in the twenty years she's been married to my brother. Once, to tell me that she was leaving him for someone else—she didn't—and the second time to ask if I could proofread a letter she was sending to her homeowner's association. I told her to fuck off both times.

Before they found this tumor on top of my lung, I only heard from my brother when he had good news. Despite his wife's cheating, he's had a lot of it. He and the Nazarene have seven children—two sets of twins and three outliers. The whole lot of them live in the town of Weeki Wachi on the West Coast of Florida where, if I'm judging correctly from the Christmas photographs, they spend their time lounging in hot pink short-sleeve shirts by a roaring picture of fire. My brother visited me once at my town home in D.C. The Nazarene had taken the kids on some kind of retreat. The week he spent with me, we did not have one real conversation. Like over the phone, we sat across from one another and transferred information. He told me about his kids. I told him about my work. He told me about his big ass church. I told him about my work. He quoted the Bible. I quoted *The Washington Post*. But when, at the beginning of the year, I called to tell him about the cancer, the content of our conversations changed. He talked about second opinions, alternative treatments, vitamins, cures that could be had over the borders—mysterious injections in Canada, miraculous enemas in Mexico.

Characters aren't always who they seem to be: For someone who has such a belief in the rapture of the afterlife, my brother sure is in no hurry to get his Sis there. For the last few months he's been making the drive up to Northern Virginia every other week, taking me to appointments and waiting faithfully with my purse while I receive chemo, radiation, and lately, grim news. My final appointment was yesterday. I said goodbye to my doctor. He shook my hand and then kissed it, as gracious in loss as Ben Fernandez once was. My brother was watching us from his seat in the waiting room. Because this thing has spread, I walk like my hip is broken now and as I made my way to him I swear I could feel him feeling like he was doing a good deed, being with his sister in her darkest hour. There he was, burning into his brain the image of me struggling to make it to him. It annoyed me, knowing that he'll play that image back to himself when I'm dead. When he handed me my purse, I raised it as high as I could and whacked him over the head with it. He said "Oww" and "What was that for?" I didn't answer him. Though we are no longer close, we're still family, and he knew exactly what it was for.

The symbols become clearer: Yesterday, in a moment of mortality-induced weakness, I let my brother convince me to go on what he called "a forgiveness road trip." He loaded me up in his beat-up minivan, its interior soaked with the smell of seven kids. As we headed south on I-95, the symbol hit me. Like Prufrock's coffee spoons, I have measured out my life in exits off that interstate. There was Richmond Highway, my first real job. Then Van Dorn, the studio apartment after my divorce, a divorce I'd finalized off Backlick Road. I've set up campaign events at Woodbridge and Quantico, coordinated rallies down the Rappahannock corridor. Now, another exit off I-95, somewhere north of Palm Beach, a decidedly liberal county, awaited me.

My brother is still as blonde as the sun. As he drove south through

the noontime traffic in Virginia, his head was a bright bowl in the corner of my eye, tossing as he talked about the closure that forgiveness brings. He considers himself an expert on the subject, having publicly forgiven Augie years ago, with the help of a circle of Nazarenes who accompanied him to the sentencing phase of Augie's murder trial. "When you mean it, Sis, it feels really good." That's what my brother told me as we crossed into Northampton County, North Carolina, the self-espoused peanut roasting capitol of the South.

There are flashbacks that should explain some things: Before my brother was a good swimmer, I would carry him piggy-back into the ocean, struggling to paddle with the weight of him until we reached a small sandbar about a hundred feet off the shore, where I would set him down and we would play games. Our favorite was a wrestling match we called "Sharks and Squids." The goal was simple: push your opponent off the table of sand and laugh your ass off as he struggled not to drown in deep water. If you were the shark, you could bite the squid and ram it with your hips to knock him off the table. If you were the squid, you could strangle and wrestle the shark off the ledge. The first player to win 21 games was the champion.

One day, after sloshing around for hours in the water like a pair of drunken sailors, we found ourselves bitten, strangled, tired, and tied, 20 wins for my brother, 20 wins for me. We'd been so focused on winning, we hadn't noticed the tide rolling in. My brother was bobbing up to his chest in waves and he wanted to head back and break the tie another day. "One more game," I said, twisting his ear until he agreed. He called for shark and turned for the center of the ring. To my right, a large wave approached. It was the best kind for swimming. Who knows why, but in the instant that it crested, I dove into the back of it. When I surfaced, I heard my brother screaming, "Caroline, come back! Caroline, come back!" I could not see him, but I could hear him hollering, like a shameless seagull, calling for me over and over again in that squeaky voice of his. A narrator should learn some things when telling her own story: I should have turned around to get him. I knew it then. Even now, I cannot make out why I didn't.

Of course my brother didn't drown. He got on his back and the tide eventually pulled him in. I was waiting on the shore for him with his towel and he took it, letting it drag behind him as he whimpered a victim's march home. At supper that night, he told my mother and the two Jai Lai players who had escaped their *fronton* and were staying with us for the week, that I had tried to drown him. The Jai Lai players wore their *cestas* on their arms at all times, even when eating. "Like a pair of fiddler crabs," my mother said and then she told me to tell my brother that I was sorry. When I refused, the shorter of the two men reached across the dinner table with his wooden basket arm and nudged my shoulder.

"Say sorry," he said.

I wouldn't have said sorry for him even if he'd threatened to scoop me up in his *cesta* and hurl me against the side of our house.

My brother was sitting across from me, between the two *fronton*-fugitives, smiling like the sainted. "That's okay," he said, patting the Jai Lai player's shoulder. "I forgive her anyways."

There are moments of awkwardness in a story: After North Carolina, we made our way through one of those bamboozling areas in rural South Carolina where I-95 melds with a state road such that you get tricked into driving through what the locals consider a business district and you become convinced, after a dozen or so poorly-timed traffic lights, that you might as well stop. After filling up the minivan at a pay-inside gas station, my brother walked me to the bathroom around the back. He had to help me pull my pants down and then set me up on a wobbly toilet, the kind of craftsmanship that can only be found in the Deep South. While his Sis took a shit, he guarded the doorway to my indignity like he was a hero, the captain of the gate.

On reflection, it becomes easier to find links: Like my mother, my brother was obsessed with turtles as a child. On the windowsill in our bathroom at home he had all kinds of turtle figurines—a turtle family sunbathing, turtles singing a capella, a turtle fly fishing with his turtle son. As I balanced on the toilet in South Carolina, my brother told me that he'd passed the whole collection down to one of his sons. "You should see him play with them. He loves it. It's more than a hundred pieces now." There are moments when the protagonist isn't perfect: When my brother helped me up off the seat, I told him that collecting useless shit is an inherited-trait weakness. He didn't say a word to me as we made our way through the last miles of the Palmetto state.

Even when you're only days away from a dramatic end, your brain reserves enough energy for a little guilt. When we got to Georgia, I was feeling bad enough to ask my brother to tell me something else of his kids. "It'll help pass the ride through that long dick-tease of a state before Florida." There was evidence that my brother was still hurt. He said he didn't understand why a woman of my age, especially one so ill—my brother wouldn't dare say "so near judgment day" to me—could utter such foul things like "shit" and "dick-tease." I told him if he wasn't so fucking pussy-whipped he'd understand how really good it feels to curse. "Like forgiveness, it's cathartic if you really mean it."

There are still surprises: My brother laughed so hard he nearly drove us into the median.

"Okay, okay," he said. "I'll tell you a story."

It seems that his son with the turtle fetish recently won first prize in a PTA writing contest at his school for a story he wrote in response to the year's theme—"Wow."

"'Wow' is the theme?"

"The theme is 'Wow.'"

The PTA demographic has never been noted for creativity, but my nephew took on "Wow" as if it were worthy of exploration. The main character of his "Wow" narrative was a Turtle named "Turt." From what I gathered from my brother's account of the story, this Turt was a him who laid eggs every season, up and down the Florida shore. I had to interrupt.

"Two problems. First, male turtles don't lay eggs and second, it's a known fact that female turtles choose the same spot every year in which to lay their eggs."

"But he doesn't know that."

"Why not?"

"He's only six."

"Six? How old is the oldest one?"

My brother has this annoying habit of orienting the good events in his life with the bad events in mine. "We had the first set of twins the year you and Lewis got divorced."

I couldn't let that one go. "So this one was born after the Nazarene princess screwed around on you the first time, or before?"

He changed lanes. "She was sorry."

"Let me guess, you forgave her and now everything is heavenly at home."

"It wasn't her fault. She has an excitement addiction."

"What the hell is that?"

"It's a real thing. She gets bored with just being married and feels like she needs to have affairs. Our pastor says excitement is as tough to quit as heroin. She's beating it, though. She just had her 8-month anniversary."

"And what if she relapses to a life of excitement?"

"I have faith that she won't, but if she does, I'll have to forgive her."

I hardly have the energy to raise my voice these days, but for this

question I did. "Why the fuck should you forgive her?"

My brother raised his voice too. "Because a Christian, as Christ commands, forgives seventy times seven times."

I did the math in my head. "And what happens, if after the four hundred ninetieth time you've forgiven her, she still cheats?"

My brother took his eyes off the road to look at me. "I don't expect you to understand this, Sis, but I keep forgiving her." I laughed as he spelled it out for me. "It's called L-O-V-E."

"Yeah? Well, Mother L-O-V-E-D people and look where that got her."

My brother turned his attention back to the highway, switching to the left lane and picking up speed. "Just let me finish the 'Wow' story."

"Fine. Finish it," I said.

"Okay, so one year, this Turt, he decided to try his luck on the Georgia coast, but he was picked up and washed into a motor boat that cut off his front flipper."

"Why did he choose the Georgia coast?"

"He just did."

"And then what?"

"That's the end."

The piece needed character work, but I told my brother that of his kids, this one sounded like he had promise. "I mean he totally strayed from the theme of 'Wow,' but at least there was some vengeance in his story."

Different people interpret a story differently: My brother didn't see his son's story as having a vengeance theme. Combine this conflict of interpretation with a little moment of crisis—My brother turning to me, his head glowing in the near dusk darkness, and just as he's saying—"You can't see that the story is a lesson about loyalty?" And I'm about halfway through asking, "And what the hell do you know about loyalty?"—the line of cars in front of us that had been clipping along, slammed on their brakes.

All stories need action. Of course things should happen: We did all the screaming and hand-flailing people do when they're hurdling towards a line of already-collided cars at the rate of seventy-five or so miles per hour in a vehicle manufactured in the prior century. My brother, who I'd taught to drive when he was only thirteen, managed to avoid the pileup by swerving his minivan onto the shoulder and then, once we'd cleared the line of the less fortunate, back onto the highway again. Neither of us said anything for a good mile and then we shared one of those moments that was almost too well-scripted to believe: My brother and I, at the same time, said "Wow," bubbling over with the hysterical laughter of two people given another chance at a little more of life.

We made it to Port Saint Lucie before sunrise. An AARP stronghold. My brother pulled the minivan into the parking lot of an old condo building by the water. It had once been pink. The water was still blue, lapping against the seawall beneath our parking spot. My brother turned off the minivan and shut his eyes.

"Is this where he lives?" I asked, undoing my seatbelt.

"He's in number 320," he said. "But I'm gonna take a nap. We're not due to meet with The Forgiveness Project people until noon."

I thought I heard him wrong. "Noon? That's not for another five hours."

"I know," my brother yawned and reclined his seat back. "Augie's great-niece said he doesn't feel well in the mornings, so we can't disturb him until then."

There are moments when the good will in a story gets stomped on.

"That fucker doesn't feel good? How about me?"

There's no catharsis in cursing if nobody hears you. My brother was already asleep.

A story doesn't realize anything, it just returns in unsatisfying ways: Back to my brother, sleeping next to me, both arms reaching back to grab onto the headrest, his mouth opening and closing. As a sleeper, I always thought he looked like a fish stranded on the shore, gasping for air. My mother, she used to say it was like he was floating on his back. The story returns to her too: I went looking for my mother that night she didn't come home, and though there was nothing I could have done, I saw what Augie Lester did to her, I heard what she said to him before he did it. Afterwards, I fished her silver crown from the beach like a shell and blew the sand from its soft grooves. I rubbed the damn thing against my sleeve until it shined like a diamond in the moonlight. Later, when I went home and sat at the end of my brother's bed, watching him sleep, I squeezed her crown in my fist and let it bite at my palm, waiting for him to finish floating, to wake up so that I could tell him how sorry I was.

The Dresses

Her mother always calls England "foreign." And when she does, it sounds even better than Peaches imagines. It will be everything that is different and not the tenement yard where they live, or the zinc-roofed market where they buy food, or the men on the corner smelling of overproof rum.

When she finally gets there in the winter of 1960, the days are blustery and cold the sounds of the cars, and the people of every color, shape and size. She buys a jacket from the Salvation Army in the Walworth Road where her Aunt Tilly told her she bought a jacket when she went to Foreign in 1935. Wool and practical, she finds a small tag in the lapel that says "Property of Miss Emmeline Hamill" and she spends all night wondering who Miss Hamill is and why she no longer needs this coat.

Her aunt proves an invaluable resource and Peaches gets a job through Miss Jennie, friend of her aunt's. Miss Jennie, takes her for a cup of tea in a pub in Tottenham Court. Miss Jennie's been in England for almost twenty years now. She wears a felt hat adorned with a clump of red plastic cherries and her shoes are bright red and plastic looking.

The pub feels cold, and even though she is wearing her heaviest dress and the thick stockings her uncle sent her from Canada, she is still too cold. She tries to drink the tea as quickly as she can.

"I long to go home," Miss Jennie says, sipping her tea. "I'm too old for all of this anymore. But you'll get used to it. And then you'll long for home, too."

"Maybe," Peaches says.

Miss Jennie, tells her about a basement flat in Brixton for five pounds a week and then tells her about the job she's found her in Notting Hill Gate.

"This is special," Miss Jennie says "The Stuarts aren't as fussy as most of the others."

She leans into Peaches and says softly, "Most of the families here would prefer a gal from Ireland rather than a colored gal from the islands. So behave yourself, you hear?"

She looks Peaches up and down, studying her face, her hair her nails. She needs washing, styling and grooming before she is to show up at the Stuarts in two days time. They take the train to Brixton where a woman from her parish cuts her hair, and puts it in drop curls, telling her to sleep sitting up so she won't muss it.

So starts her time in Foreign, with new hair, and two new hand-me-down winter dresses from Miss Jennie's daughters who go to school in Canada. Miss Jennie presents them to her before she drops her off that evening at the top of the steps that lead down to her new cold water flat.

Everything in the flat feels moist. She stows her suitcase under the small iron bed and unwraps the thick brown butcher paper to reveal the two dresses, one plaid and one dark blue, both freshly pressed.

Mr. and Mrs. Stuart and their two small children are quite lovely. Peaches takes the Tube into the city very early wearing Miss Emmeline Hamill's sturdy wool coat and works until it is dark. She rubs Vaseline into her cracked, dry skin and watches it greedily absorb the salve. She imagines that her life was always like this.

The contentment can't last too long. One day Mr. Stuart meets her in the cloak room where she is putting on the threadbare coat, gathering her pocketbook and sliding her feet into the boots she's had to line with cardboard. He suggests a show, a dinner. Peaches is too stunned to answer. No man has ever spoken to her this way, both exciting and scary.

"I don't think that would be right Mr. Stuart," she finally manages to say.

She drops her eyes, drops her head, stares at the intersecting loops,

and the maze of flowers on the carpet of the cloakroom floor.

"Call me Alistair," he says and leans in and kisses her.

For the rest of the evening she thinks about that kiss. The very next day, too, running the moment over and over again in her mind as she takes the children out for air, dresses them for bed. At the end of the day she retreats again to the cloakroom. There she finds a bundle with her name, and inside a pretty long-sleeved winter dress with paisley print. At nineteen, this is the first gift she has received from a man and that knowledge makes her stomach tingle with excitement.

The Gloves

At twenty-one Peaches has become the type of woman who won't demure about gifts. She won't feign modesty or argue that they are too much and then give in to cajoling or pleading. She simply accepts them as they come, when they come and is grateful.

One winter evening a package comes as the late evening sun begins to sink in the sky. The bustle of children coming home from school and men home from work has quieted as people take their evening tea. The delivery boy is from Harrods and Peaches tips 5p. Harrod's delivery men aren't often in Brixton and as she shuts the door she wonders if he was paid extra to come out of central London.

She pulls the crisp brown paper from the package. The gloves, long, cashmere and grey come up to her elbows and are fastened by small mother of pearl buttons. She tries them on right away and admires the way her arm looks long and posh in the glass. She puts on the old winter coat, and admires the way the buttons glisten making the coat look nicer than it is. The gloves are the ones Peaches saw in the shop window and stopped to admire before Alistair hustled her down the street.

She puts the gloves away and reheats a plate of food The Stuarts cook has given her. She eats alone, just as she has each night in the two years she's been in England. The food, mushy peas and braised lamb, needs salt. She hears her neighbors moving around in their flats, mother scolding their children, teenage girls singing along with the radio, the sound of a television set, the smell of fried fish. She has no books, no radio and no television. She came all the way from Jamaica with one small suitcase. She listens to her neighbors in the evening, smells their cooking and tries to pretend she is a part of the lives they live.

It is Friday, so tonight she will write her mother, putting in a portion of her weekly wages so that her mother will be able to get a little extra food, a new dress, a cloth for her table. It isn't much money, but there is no one else to give her anything, so Peaches does what she can. In the letter, she writes about the things that will surprise her mother--- the high pitched chirp the train makes as it pulls into the station, the depth and power of the river Thames, the way the trees bud in the springtime and how lovely it looks.

On Saturday she meets Alistair in Kensington Park and thanks him for the gloves.

"It's nothing," he says, "You wanted them and so they were to be yours."

In the park, he points out all that is new. New buildings, new monuments, everything ruined in the war. The bombs came down destroying most everything that was old and forcing new things. He tells her he sold books of vouchers to help raise money for the RAF, helped hustle people into air raid shelters, waited patiently for his father to return from Germany. All this, and he was just a boy.

"I'm sure you don't remember any of this," he says. "You would have been just a babe."

"My father," she says quietly. "My father was a British soldier."

He looks at her queerly, takes her hand in his and leads her through narrow pathways shaded by stately greens and foliage covered squares

until they stop when they reach a small cottage tucked toward the Oxford Street gate of the park's western corner.

"This is one of those relics," he says, "One of those things that the Germans didn't get." He lifts the overhanging branches and at the door he wipes the glass. Peaches looks in, like a fairy tale it is all untouched, covered by a layer of dust, a house left mid-morning 20 years prior when the family had to duck into an air raid shelter.

"It's wonderful," she says.

The Television

By 1966 Peaches knows other women who are in these relationships. They go to restaurants in the high street in Brixton or in the west end. Instead, now he comes to her on the weekends and in the evening and she makes him oxtail soup and they sit upright in bed slurping the hot broth. He eats everything, including the marrow, sucking it out of the bones and then asking for more.

"It's good for you," he says and Peaches fills up his bowl, knowing that his wife doesn't cook for him. She is careful never to bring up his wife. Or his children. After he eats, they lie around in bed and there is nothing else to do.

In the six years they've been together she has learned the way things work. She has traded her dowdy dresses for short printed mini skirts. The boots are no longer lined with cardboard, but are made of calf skin and come from a shop in the high street.

She stays in instead of going to dances at the Brixton Academy, or the house parties that spiral out from Brixton into Carnaby Street and up and up and up into central London. She spends her time with the other women like her, those working as maids, nannies and shopgirls, cutting off their time from anyone who isn't kept as they are. They take tea together from time to time in the evening. But one or the other is always waiting, hoping that she can't make it, that her Mister will come strolling down the lane with a tin of biscuits, or wine, or a new dress or anything that makes her forget that she spends most of her hours alone.

She hasn't seen Miss Jennie in four years, hasn't seen her mother or the island in six. Her life is watching the Stuart children six days a week and the evening and weekends when he comes to her, and that is all.

When Peaches comes home on the evening of her twenty-fifth birthday there is a small portable television sitting on the kitchen table. She claps her hands together, surprised. She's never had a television. She plugs it in right away and adjusts the knobs until the fuzzy snowflakes on the screen form into pictures. The knob clicks satisfyingly as she switches between BBC 1 and BBC 2.

Two weeks later, when he comes to her, he pats her head like he would a small child.

"I'm glad you like it, darling," he says. "I couldn't bear the idea of you sitting here each evening on your own."

"I like it very much," she moves toward him and he hugs her lightly, mutters "love you" in her ear and then he sits down at the card table and folds his hands together.

"It warms the place up a little, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she says, "it does." And she puts on the pot to make soup.

The Books

"How can you not know how to spell 'surely'" Alistair asks.

They are meeting on the banks of the Thames. It is a bank holiday but he's told his wife he has to work. Just last week she took his children there to play and picnic on the river's bank.

Peaches left him a note inside his jacket pocket a few days earlier

and he arranged to meet her when he discovered it earlier that day. He pulls the note out of his pocket and shows her where she misplaced an h between the s and the u.

"I haven't had much schooling," she says

"Well I can tell."

He gives her a book.

"You need to read more," he says. "I assumed that was how you passed your evenings in that flat, not filling you head with the telly."

"I'm sorry," Peaches says. She looks out on the banks of the Thames, watches the way the water looks as though it is churning and racing through the city.

"Don't be sorry, do better; you have the opportunity of a lifetime living in England, a chance to educate yourself."

The next week the Missus tells her they will only need her half time. The children are in school and there is no need for her to come every day. Her weekly pay packet remains the same and Alastair enrolls her in night classes, writing and history, and shows her how take the bus to the adult education centre in the financial district.

In her classes she meets other women, some who don't speak English, others who can't read at all. She is the classroom star and the other students are impressed at her skills, even though she stopped her schooling after grammar school, there was always work to do and never enough money for school. But many of the other women don't even have that much.

She gets a library card and takes home books and reads them in evening while she takes her evening tea. She ignores Alistair's television and pretty much everything else, until she falls asleep on the little metal cot she's slept on each night for the past seven years.

Alistair quizzes her about her classes and leaves notes in her pockets with words that she has to look up in the dictionary. She begins to see him less and less, and eventually takes another job cleaning up after an older woman who lives close to the Stuarts. Peaches misses him, but she still waits for him on the evenings when she doesn't have school, makes the pots of soup, hoping that he will come to her soon.

She hasn't seen him in almost a month when he turns up at her door during the first snowy day with a stack of books and a request for evening tea. He doesn't say anything to her until he's eaten, unlaced his boots and made a fire in her potbellied stove.

"I've missed you," he says when he finally comes to her on the bed and strokes her hair. "Have you missed me?"

"Yes," she says softly, "I was wondering if you were going to come back."

"How is school? Are you enjoying it?"

She brings her books and papers out from the cupboard where she keeps them and spreads them out across the bed. She points out the things her teachers have said and tells him about her favorite books, and for a little while he listens. Then he pushes the papers aside.

The Crib

It only takes her four years but Peaches completes her secretarial certification. Weeks will go by when she doesn't hear from Alistair. Then as the months pass, she grows larger and larger until one day the Missus pulls her into the pantry.

"Are you pregnant, girl?"

She is no longer a girl, almost thirty, and it is clear she is in the way her belly bulges out. She only works for the Stuarts twice a week now, looking after the children when their parents go out in the evening

"I am."

"Well that's just unacceptable, totally unacceptable."

She pulls an envelope out of her pocket and presses it into Peaches hand.

"Go. Just go now and don't come back."

She gets on the tube and begins her ride back to Brixton, trying to imagine how she will manage. She opens the envelope on the train and it is crammed with several hundred pounds of bank notes.

Alistair telephones her in the evening.

"I'm going to send you some things," he says.

"And you? When will I see you?"

"Eventually."

The things come, mostly from delivery men from all over the city. Peaches tips them what she can, holding her back, pressing coins into their hands as they set up a crib, a changing table and a wing-backed chair.

When it is time for the baby to come she calls one of the Jamaican women she has met in her adult education class. She comes with her brother in his car and they take her to the hospital, where she gives birth to a little boy with curly blond hair and brown eyes.

She is there until the next afternoon when her friend's brother returns to take her home. She goes slowly down the steps, into the flat she knows is crammed with things.

When she opens the door Alistair is there waiting for her. He takes the baby from her, places him on the bed and unwraps him from the swaddling the nurses did at the hospital and looks him up and down.

"He's quite lovely."

"Yes," Peaches says, "He is."

She feels like she is about to cry and turns away from him. She puts on the kettle for tea.

"I can't stay," he says. "I won't be taking any tea."

He wraps the baby up, kisses his cheek once and turns toward her. She knows he is there to give her money and knows he will not be back.

The Poems

On an evening in the late winter of 1980, in a chip shop in Paddington Peaches sees Alistair's face on the front page of the newspaper. She hadn't known he was a poet.

She buys the paper and takes it outside and sits on the curb. It is heart failure. She reads about how his wife found him in bed, cold, his eyes wide open. There is a picture of her inside the paper. His wife looks thinner and has longer fingernails. She could tell they were freshly painted bright red because she was using them to clutch the prime minister's arm. Even on the splotchy newsprint Peaches can see that she doesn't look particularly upset beneath the stiff black veil. The two children look grim and so grown up. She remembers them as tiny. She remembers how much more she liked minding children, so much more than the secretarial work she does now.

Even though the flags flew at half mast for the day, she somehow hadn't noticed. School children are being taught his most famous poem to recite at a program that was going to be aired the following Sunday evening. She still has the tiny television set and if she saves some foil from to put on the antenna and touches it slightly with her arms extended straight out, she can watch much of the memorial.

She puts the paper inside her coat and walks home without the curry. Sunday is her only day off, and she wraps the thin coat tighter

around her. She thinks about crying, but can't bring herself round to tears.

She walks toward home to make her weekly call to her mother and son back on the island, to tell them things are fine here, to promise her some sweets and toys and to promise her mother money.

But before she goes back to Brixton she walks up and down the streets of the Portobello Road market. In one stall filled with books she looks for a volume by Alistair. She asks the bookseller if he has one. He rummaged around in a box.

"His name again, luv?"

She repeats herself, her arms folded across her chest.

He plucks a slim volume from the stack. The cover is battered but she sees the imprint of the peach tree on the front and hands the man a five pound note.

She goes back to the house and reads the poems first at the dinner table and then in the tub where she runs the faucet at a trickle to keep the water warm, until the steam makes the paper soggy.

Liane LeMaster
Charms for Shaping the Dead

There were no roads leading up the steep hill from the town, just a tiny cart path overgrown with weeds and vines. The buses ran only as far as Delaver Pass, past the Church of the Everlasting Redemption, past Tom's Grocery and the Elk Lodge, past Dill's Tavern where men used to drink and gamble and shoot one another in fits of rage. Once, children had played in the open commons or along the coal slags while their mothers hung gray laundry off the sagging front porches of their row houses, but the flood of 1927 had destroyed most of the homes. Black sludge, thick with coal dust, pooled in front of the abandoned company store. A homemade sign tacked to a telephone pole read *Pass Closed—Danger* and pointed a crude arrow toward the woods.

Trees grew dense a mile in, sugar and red maple, shagbark and hickories, and the cart path stopped abruptly beneath a felled oak. A dark canopy of bellwort and milkweed made a green dome of the earth. Kudzu grew so thick and swiftly, it could cover an entire tree in one afternoon. Deeper in, the sky disappeared beneath the cluster of white oak and red pine. Those who lived among the hills knew well enough not to travel at night when the Gray Man hummed through the woods in search of souls, footsteps echoing, a sudden drop in pressure like a storm approaching, then silence and the scream of the victim's panicked soul slithering up the throat and out through the mouth. Those who lived among the hills knew to walk in daylight, sticking to the westward bend, keeping the sound of the river in the ear until the land suddenly leveled out, flowering dogwood giving way to rolling hills of dandelion and hemlock and deep, lusty grass, each mound a shade darker than the one before it.

Even in daylight, a mist hovered over the valley that didn't clear. From a distance, it was hard to see the house at all. It perched on the side of the hill the same color as the dark, loamy dirt. The animals roamed wild, chicken and cows, only one mule tethered to the back porch because he was touched, and if left off the rope would turn circles and bray through the night. The screen door, added thirty years prior, was busted and hanging on its hinges. Cracks in the windowpanes were covered in faded newsprint. The front porch was high, built on stilts that held despite torrential rains.

Beneath the porch, a small trench of rotting leaves dug its way into the mountain. Built as a crude larder decades before, the trench was wide enough for a boy to crawl in on his hands and knees for several paces before the earth sloped and forced him to his belly. If he reached his hand out, as boys did in the deep recesses of the mines to scrape the edges of the coal seams finding places for the flares, he would feel the smooth front door of the box. The box was four sides heart pine, a header and footer, built the way generations of his kin had fashioned caskets, toe-pinchers they called them. Any boy reared in the hills knew the measurements as surely as he knew how to hunt and fish, how to pull the hide off his kill, how to forage for ginseng and yarrow and other curatives, how to sing a ballad that would draw the spirits to melancholy and drown their fury so he and his family could sleep untroubled through the night.

Duncan placed his hand on the latch. The box had been the last thing he'd managed to build before his sickness took his right hand and puffed it up like a gourd. Fat, useless hand, it wouldn't hold a hammer steady. He'd taken days to fashion the door to fit. It kept coming up crooked, just like his misaligned head, until he'd sanded it down to the shape it needed to be. He pulled the door open and crawled inside. Beneath the porch, the chill of the earth soothed his aching muscles and the dark box felt like a cradle, a room he never wanted to leave.

He didn't know the cause of his affliction. One side of his face was growing faster than the other. The cartilage sloped across the bridge of his nose like tusk, the right side of his jaw curved out like a balloon. His shoulders sloped upward on his right side and he had to shuffle when he walked like an old man. The teacher at Delaver Pass blamed the coal company for placing him nine ladders down and forcing him to carry a creel of coal fourteen fathoms to the pit bottom, a burden so heavy it often ruptured the men who lifted it onto his back. His sister thought it was a birth defect. She'd been born first and had taken all the oxygen

from the womb when she left it. His grandmother invoked Pastor to heal him and the man had yanked Duncan from his seat under the sweating white Revival tent, held his nose, not finding closure with the misshapen tilt of Duncan's skin, and plunged him deep into the lukewarm tub of water. Duncan saw himself floating out across the fields of mist, out across Due's Creek, over Kanawha County into the center of Charleston. When he came to, Pastor's wife was frantically blowing her lemon-drop breath into his lungs and his grandmother was swooned in the arms of Whitey Griffiths. Pastor didn't like seeing Duncan after that. Pastor said it was a sign of Duncan's own sinful heart that his face hadn't returned to its proper order, any righteous boy would have been made whole.

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Alison slams her fist down on the table, rattling the plastic menus in their stand and upending the salt shaker. Her daughter, scrunched down in her wheelchair, jumps slightly in her seat. Ross glances over at her. Behind her head, a television hangs above the counter showing the NASCAR race. A lizard interrupts to sell car insurance.

"Why do you tell the story that way?" Alison asks. "Your family was respectable people. Your grandfather owned a bank."

"He worked in a bank," her husband says. "He didn't own it."

"Your family lived in town. They didn't live in a holler up the woods from a coal mine with ghosts and mules. Don't fill her head with all that hillbilly crap."

"You used to live here, too."

"We lived in Beckley. My father was a doctor. My mother worked in the library. None of our family ever mined coal."

She dips her fingers into the spilled salt, throws a pinch over her left shoulder. Ross watches her with that hang-dog expression as if he can't make up his mind to kiss her or yell at her and she turns from him, reaching for Mya's Sprite and holding the straw to her daughter's lips. Bubbles rise beneath the ice. She doesn't know why she's come on this journey, riding seven hours in the car from Winston-Salem to attend his grandmother's funeral. And she can't imagine why she agreed to bring Mya. They'd had to stop twice at rest areas so Alison could maintain her therapy, massaging her daughter's slanting muscles from their cramps while her husband couldn't find anything more useful to do than stand beside them in the late autumn sun, squinting. It used to be charming how he told stories about his ancestors, their hard scrabble determination, not relying on anyone else to save them, but like most of the things he's told her it's turned out to be nothing but a story. She pulls the straw away from her daughter's mouth and wipes the dribble of soda from her lips. "That's enough sugar, baby."

"Mamaw used to put RC in my bottle," Ross says, trying to get the girl to smile. When she smiles, the bulbous side of her mouth turns down at the corner but her eyes sparkle. He can read her expressions despite their incongruity. Doctors in Raleigh want to operate to smooth out the *dentomaxillofacial abnormalities*, to cut into her brain cavity and realign the bones from the chin up but they can't give him the statistics he requires before agreeing to let them remove his daughter's face. His wife wants it done yesterday. She uses her training as an emergency room nurse against him. They've been arguing about it for months. He's afraid he'll return from work one day to find that his daughter's face has been lopped off. He has dreams about it and in his dreams she's always lying at the bottom of a deep well in a golden casket, one half of her face a bloody hole.

The waitress swings through the dining room with her coffee pot. She tries not to stare at the child, her poor little back all hunched and twisted like that. The man had struggled getting the wheelchair through the front door only to find the dining hall crowded with chairs and tables. She'd had to move a table over by the bus station to make room for them and neither the man nor the woman had thanked her. Now the poor thing sits all squished on her side, leaning into the headrest. Her seat cover is purple with yellow fringe and they'd placed a little zebra-print pillow on

the child's lap and the waitress thinks that's indecent. She's seen plenty of things in her time, babies born without this or that, men losing parts of themselves in war but the sight of that child all tarted up opens up a deep resentment inside her. They ought not to call attention to it.

"You like your eggs, honey?" the waitress asks in a voice that is too loud. No one answers her. She places the bill on the man's side but the woman slides it across the table and looks at it, then places it back facedown on the counter.

"Can you walk up into the mountains from here?" Ross asks the waitress. "See the old mines, the old coal camps?"

"Lord, honey, not now," the waitress says. She places the coffee pot down on the table. "Wouldn't be nothing to see if you did. Used to be all of this area up above Pike's Creek was covered in mines. Paint Creek, Cabin Creek, they've still got them working but not this far up."

The waitress fills the man's cup but the woman covers her cup with her hand and the waitress moves on to the next table.

Ross watches how his wife struggles to remove her wallet from her purse. Just that morning in the hotel room she'd cried, Mya snoring softly, curled on the other double bed. When he'd tried to hold her, Alison rose and went to the bathroom, turning on the faucet. The day before, on their way through Beckley before the viewing, she'd demanded that they stop and look at the house where she grew up even though there was little time to spare. She'd gotten them lost, directing him over and over to the same intersection which she couldn't recognize, the same street full of gray houses, their siding dusted with coal. She didn't remember the address, having moved to Chapel Hill when she was four and had finally given up, turning from the window to glare at him as if he'd somehow hijacked her childhood.

When the girl speaks, she has to take her time forming the words.

"Daddy, why the box?" she asks.

"What box, honey?" Ross asks. He places his hand over his daughter's. The fingers on her right hand have nearly fused together from the swelling.

"Under the porch."

"They had to bury their grandmother in it," Ross says. "Story says if you didn't prepare the body right it would walk and haunt you. You remember there was two of them, Duncan and Mamaw, that's his sister Marnie, and no one else for miles so after the rains came they were all but stranded until the workers could get through."

"Mamaw is Marnie?"

"Yes, baby. My grandmother. So you see how I know these things."

Alison stands and places her hands on Mya's wheelchair. His grandmother's church is just down the road toward the Pass but who knows how long it will take to navigate the muddy roads and then they'll have to get Mya's wheelchair into the sanctuary. She starts for the door, but the dining room is crowded and people have to scoot their chairs in when she passes, trying not to stare. A couple stand by the front door, waiting for a table and the man sucks in his breath sharply as they pass.

"She got MS?" the man asks.

"It's Proteus Syndrome," the woman tells them, holding fast to the handles of the wheelchair. "Look it up."

She's grown used to the stares and she fights the weight of ignorance with knowledge. Proteus lived in a cave on the side of a hill and could only give prophecies when he slept. When awake, he was able to change his shape at will but even this is only a story. There was no Proteus just a boy whose metabolic disease twisted his hands and his feet and caused his skull to bulge at the sides. Mya had been born without a blemish on her skin, her features smooth and delicate, her chin the exact shape as Alison's own, pointed like the blunt end of a shovel.

"Daddy talks about that conjure hoodoo," she says to her daughter. "If anyone had the sense to take that poor Duncan to the doctor's he might have lived a longer life."

"Was he like me?" the girl asks. The words are difficult to form around her swollen lips. A little girl walking a few paces ahead of her parents slows to a stop beside Mya's chair. Mya leans her head back and hisses at the child, who runs back to her parents crying.

"That wasn't nice, Mya."

"So what?" The girl hunches over against her head rest. "Let Daddy tell me the story."

Ross doesn't hear her request. He's standing in the vestibule of the restaurant, worrying a toothpick into the corner of his gum and looking at the front page of the *Charleston Gazette*.

"I'll tell you the story," Alison says. "The first woman doctor around here was Mrs. Minot. I went to High School with one of her grandchildren. She'd been using natural remedies like they did back then but then she went to college and learned how to cure people the right way."

"Miz Minot was a midwife," Ross says, suddenly standing behind her and listening in on things that should be private. "She never went a day past sixth grade."

Alison pushes Mya's wheelchair out the front door but has to wait on Ross to help her carry it down the front steps. At ten years old, Mya weighs only forty-three pounds. People move aside to watch but no one offers to help and when they finally make their way across the gravel parking lot to the car, lift Mya into her seat and fold the chair up and stow it in the trunk, a crowd has formed in front of the restaurant, hanging over the porch railing, standing in small clumps, not even trying to hide their curiosity.

It takes them half an hour to drive the curving road up the mountain to the tiny white church with the red door. A man with a jet black toupee and skin rubbed raw from the cold wind stands at the front door and directs them toward the side entrance where a makeshift ramp had been assembled. Alison lets Ross take the chair and watches him tilt Mya back, wheelie style, while she squeals and laughs. There is a thirty percent survival rate with the bones she has, after the operation it will rise to forty-five but only if Mya can survive the surgery. She can see why her husband would be scared and she wishes there were charms that she could invoke, a globe she could peer into to ensure the validity of her choice. She can hear singing inside the church, so many harmonies building on top of one another, instruments she's not heard since she was a little girl. She walks back to the car, turns on the heat and sits there until the funeral is over and the people spill out of the front door, a meager group, eight women with hats and three men in dark, shiny suits. When she turns off the car and walks toward the side entrance, Ross is already standing out behind a large elm tree, Mya next to him, chatting with a the red-faced man as if he hadn't even missed her.

She walks toward them and the red-faced man smiles.

"So you remember Miz Minot," he says. "She was my momma's momma."

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Miz Minot carried her tattered valise with her everywhere she went because rare was the moment that a person didn't need medicinals for Planter's wart or a paste to make the mucus run clear. Her people had been midwives for much of the nineteenth-century since they'd first come to these mountains and when it was time to catch the babies, the Minot women traveled through hail and rain and sleet and snow to ease the birthing.

They were also called on to prepare the body for burial. Miz Minot knew that Duncan MacGiven, the boy with the charmed bones, and his sister had been caring for Old Miz MacGiven up at Pike's Pass since

long before the rains and when Miz Minot had finally been able to get through, the children were sitting on the front stoop, covered in black mud and looking out past the clearing as if they'd been waiting for her.

The old woman's body had been laid out in the parlor. First, Miz Minot pulled a tub of fresh water from the well. Then she soaked the rags, first the red one to collect the poison off the skin, then the white to show its cleanliness. The method was a habit of comfort, not a prescription. It made the survivors feel better to think their beloved was pure. After she washed the body, she brushed the hair. She didn't believe in cutting the woman's plait and wrapping it in tissue as a sign of respect. The dead wouldn't roam in search of peace. As long as they'd accepted Jesus into their hearts, the dead went straight to Heaven. Miz Minot didn't believe in spirits and haints. She believed in God, in life and death, in babies and corpses. They were often the same going as coming, frail and needy.

Miz Minot bathed her hands in the same tub of water and rubbed a poultice of ash and arrowroot and wrapped her raw palms with the white rags.

"Is she really dead?' the girl asked.

The woman nodded.

"Shouldn't we rub some yeast on her hands? See if the dog licks it off?"

"That doesn't tell," the woman said. "I put the mirror up against her face and it won't fog. She's dead, honey."

"I couldn't get the grave dug," the girl said. "It kept filling up with water cause of the rains."

Miz Minot reached into her open valise. She placed a small red bowl on the floor before her. She unfolded a tray of leaves and began shredding them into the bowl. She hummed as she pulled a pinch of white powder from a pouch in her shirt pocket. She poured yellow oil from a cask slung across her belt. Each pocket carried treasure, seeds and powders and dried leaves. She threw them into the bowl. She took a pestle from her lap and began grinding the mixture into a smooth paste. She poured it into a clean Mason jar and swirled the contents. The liquid in the jar turned amber. She passed it to the girl.

"No, ma'am, I can't drink that."

"Yes, you can," the woman said. "You want to wake up smarting from all that digging? I got through from my house easy so it won't be no time at all before somebody can get up here and take her down to church."

"We ain't been baptized," the boy with the charmed bones said.

"I've seen some horrible things in my day," she said. "People always think they have the corner on suffering until something worse comes along. Men and children going down into the shafts, digging every day on their knees with a little pick, digging deeper into their own graves and if they weren't crushed by the rocks, they were strangled by gases. People got shot in their homes, forced out on the street, babies left by the road because there wasn't anything to feed them. Your grandmother was smart. She kept to herself. When your grandpappy took off, she carried on without him. You children made her happy and she did the best she could by you."

The woman gathered her tools, wiped them with her apron and piled them back into her valise. The children were only thirteen years old. There would be no other place for them to go. Things were growing more difficult in the camps. The boy was already crippled and unable to work and the girl couldn't support the both of them. People could live for generations in these hills without any outside help. She could train the girl as her assistant. Both her daughters had died as infants. Miz Minot didn't tell them that further down the mountain, right outside Charleston in a green house by the railroad tracks, their mother lived with her second family, a husband, a daughter and a son.

~

Ross doesn't dispute the red-faced man's story. He's heard it before. It makes little difference now if his great-grandfather was raised by kin or wolves, the gene that sloped his face had carried on in spite of where he'd been laid to rest or who had prepared his body or if he'd taken Jesus.

"Daddy, I'm charmed?" Mya asks.

"Yes," his wife says quickly. "You've got a guardian angel and she won't let anything bad happen to you. You'll have to excuse us," she says to the red-faced man and he can hear the tension in her voice. "We've got a long drive."

"Does she want something to drink?" the man asks, pointing at Mya's head.

"No," Mya says loudly. "She doesn't."

Ross watches his wife push his daughter over the grass and he knows that by the time he pulls into the driveway later that night, he will have conjured every scenario possible. He'll see the doctor's waiting room, see himself pacing and drinking too much coffee and enduring a wait that no amount of planning can prepare him for. He'll see the doctor opening the door, see his wife turn from the window where she's been staring at the parking lot, hear the quick intake of air that fills his lungs, knowing that neither one of them has traveled far enough into the story to know what shape it will take or how they'll manage to remain standing once it comes.

Jessica Moore
Senior Year Pep Rally

Daniella waddled through the hallways, her jewelry decorated hand on her lower back and her other hand supporting the over growing world hidden in her stomach. The hallways were crowded with dancing and screaming teenagers ready to graduate and ready to get out of school, it was the last day. Red and black streamers blew from the ceilings and silly string flew through the air. The football players paraded through the gym with the cheerleaders jumping around on either side of them, yelling congratulations for winning the championship, the baseball players all sat together with their respective girlfriends and the teachers lined the edges of the gym watching almost fearfully, but were too caught up in the moment to stop themselves. Daniella, however, moved with a sense of urgency between people. In reality she had never much been a part of the school festivities. She neared the heavy iron doors that would have locked the students in on any other day and stepped outside looking for Yesenia. There were a total of 12 Latino students at the school. 1 Cuban, 5 Mexicans, 4 Puerto Ricans, 1 Panamanian and 1 Dominican, there would have been 13, but the other Dominican had graduated. Since their first year they had forgotten their cultural separateness and put aside the jokes that each Latino likes to tell about their neighboring nation and they skipped school together, hung out together, did homework together…everything. Call it survival, call it being ostracized in a military town that saw them all as illegal immigrants or strange foreigners, they just spoke together and ate together and learned how to understand each others dialects. In that southern town it was often seen, this segregation. The Latinos never went out to anywhere, except church, the blacks went out on Saturday night to the skating ring, bowling alley and clubs and the whites went out to the same places on Friday. It was a natural occurrence. Daniella walked outside to see Alejandro and Yesenia sitting on his car. Yesenia and Alejandro had had an unofficial thing going on for as long as she could remember. Yesenia always said that Alejandro would not take her home because she was Cuban, but not only a Cuban, a Cuban of African descent…Daniella agreed, but she had never said it to Yesenia's face, she knew how much Yesenia loved Alejandro and how much Alejandro…was determined to keep Yesenia in his life. Stopping at the restored impala, out of break, Rico brought her a plastic chair he fished from the back of Alejandro's car. (Rico is the Puerto Rican.)

Sientete Dani…que pasa…you're breathing like a dog in heat.

Callate, Rico…anyone seen, Amaury?

Amaury was the Panamanian that stuck with them. He was tall, smooth skinned and black as purple with a smile that made you feel as good as anything. No one had seen him for the last hour or so. It had become a routine among them to check up on Amaury. He came to school his Junior year, made valedictorian and was popular for playing soccer. He avoided them for a while, but after having some run-in racial slurs, he totally separated himself from the cliques and joined theirs. First, the white kids egged him on for speaking with an accent and accused him of being African when he was obviously speaking Spanish. Then when the black kids began to wonder about his accent as well and ask him if he was black or not, he always answered.

I am Panamanian.

This infuriated some of the black students. Was he denying his culture? Was he distancing himself from them? Did he hate himself? In his eyes he was a black as they were. In our eyes he was Panamanian. No one understood, just like we did not understand. Americans always said Asian, black, or white but they never said…American. Latinos, we always identified by our nationality and our race was something debated within the arms of our cultures whether for the better or the worst, but we always identified by the country we came from. It was easy for most of us. Yesenia was tall with olive skin, extremely curly light brown hair and green eyes…she was typical Latina in the eyes of the students there. The majority of us has dark hair, dark or green eyes, spoke Spanish. We fit the Jennifer Lopez, Antonio Banderas stereotype that everyone had…except Amaury. He threw everyone for a loop when he spoke Spanish and ate arroz con pollo with us from our lunch boxes…or when he would fool

around and dance Bachata with Maria in the hallway. Everyone else, even the little Peruvian girl who wore white make-up that we never counted amongst ourselves, picked on him for just being who he was. Recently, however, things had gotten out of hand. A group of boys from St. Louis who were black came to the school, a group of about 8. They were pretty civil with everyone else, but Amaury. They would push him around in the hallway, pick on him, spit in his food and make him eat it and the faculty never did shit because to them…it was just another black on black thing. One day, Amaury got tired and after school, when Leon, one of the boys from St. Louis saw him and pushed him, Amaury reared back and punched him in the face so hard that he shattered his nose in three places. Again faculty just pretended it never happened and after that it had been something like war in the halls between one Amaury and 8 guys from St. Louis who no one really knew anything about.

Yesenia leaned her head on Alejandro's shoulder and he leaned down to whisper into her ear. She grinned and her hand caressed his jaw. Daniella had heard that girl say one million times…

He has a jaw like a king…una cara del rey…I love the way his mouth sits on his face…que rico.

She smirked at them and rubbed her belly. She had refused to tell us who the father was. We always suspected that Yesenia knew because they were close, but Yessie always denied everything. Alejandro, feeling brave, released Yessie and he and Rico jumped in the car and turned on Juanes *Gotas de Agua Dulce*, blasting the Cumbia Colombiana. Some students began to sway a little to the "Latin flavor" while others were yelling at them to turn it off. Another parked car near the school entrance started playing a song called 'lookin boy' and Alejandro began yelling at them until Yesenia wrapped her arms around his waist. I meanwhile had been running around the school looking for Amaury, we were planning on going to have a bar-b-que or una parilla to celebrate getting the hell out of that pit, we hated it. And Yesenia and I were tired of being the odd-Latinas out in our AP and Honors classes everyday. Especially tired of the discreet sexual solicitations from the white boys on the football team who just loved to say:

I have never been with a hot-blooded woman before.

I moved people out of the way and continued my speed walk.

Amaury! Amaury! Donde estas!

Quit talkin' that shit in hea'…dis ain't da border, spiky.

I ignored BK, which was what they called him, I will never know why and continued searching for Amaury. Out of breath I stopped at the bathroom, thinking I saw Amaury up ahead, or at least his narrow head. Letting go of the door jam I placed my hand over my chest to cover my Mary medallion that my Abuela had given me my last time to the Dominican republic, when felt the cold wetness on my chest I thought it was water, but when I glanced down…it was blood. Gagging I looked at the door jam and saw bloody handprints all over it and droplets leading past the door. I did not know what to think, there was red paint everywhere. Maybe someone was playing a joke. I smelled my hand and all I smelled was iron…that smell that stays around when a lot of blood has pooled into one place…it was the smell of iron. Looking around I took out my cell phone, regardless of the rules against them in school and called Daniella, but her account was suspended due to ALLLL the calls she made back home to Mexico that she never had money to pay for. I ran outside, crashing into people just in time to see Rico and Alejandro getting into this group of people's faces, the "punk" kids so to speak who came over and were yelling neo-Nazi crap at us, they weren't all like that. I often put rainbow colored hair mascara in my hair and hit up a few rock concerts at Hempwood Skate park where the local bands like to play. The rainbow colors…well…that was something I couldn't tell my Latina friends or my down home country friends. I ran up to Yesenia who was rolling her eyes with Daniella and the first thing I did was display my hands to them. They instantly started laughing, of course it was not blood, I put my hand up to Yesenia's nose and she froze, Daniella-seeing

her expression lifted herself from her chair.

Somebody do somsing' to ju?

I-I- no se solo pase por el bano y…crees que es pinta…

Tonta…huele de sangre….

That is how Yesenia was, louder than us, braver than us. She was usually the one who stood up for us in the lunch room, because she knew all the good cuss words in English. Daniella began checking all over me, touching the blood and smelling it, looking for the wound that was supposed to be on my body, but wasn't.

Que paso? Dilo!

I –I-I was leaving to find Amaury and I think I saw him walking down the hall or something…I touched the door frame to the boys bathroom and it is blood…someone is in there..Dani…

Dani can't go…she will miscarry all over the floor from seeing something that could be bad…

We all looked over at the boys to see if they would go, but they were still busy puffing up their chests and talking shit to the white kids who were now getting really angry with their antics. Yesenia motioned for us to follow her.

If someone is hurt we need to say something to someone right away…I will go look.

She strolled ahead of us. Her big hips swaying like a clock handle below her waist. She was a mamasota or a tall sexy woman. Her daddy was white, but he had left her and her Mami a long time ago, so she was used to standing up and being heard…she would fight for anything, even a space in line that someone stole. I put my hand on Daniella's back to help her towards the bathroom. Daniella, marched beside me as if she was on a mission to get to the bottom of what was going on. Stopping outside the bathroom where the blood was, Yesenia touched it and looked back at us with a worried expression, now she was frightened which did nothing to comfort us. Everyone was mysteriously staying away from the bathroom closest to the pep rally, usually the boys were running in and out making water balloons and filling water guns, but not this time, everyone was going about their business as far away from the door as possible. I will never forget what Yesenia told me.

She walked into the bathroom and saw a long deep red streak against the wall as if someone had supported themselves along the bathroom tile. One sink was left running and covered with watered down blood. She said it looked like someone was trying to clean up after themselves, trying to get rid of the blood on their clothes or whoever it was that was hurt. She said she turned the corner and saw the long legs extended from a bathroom stall and thinking that the boy was left for dead before his fingers moved and he gargled the blood in his chest, trying to communicate with her…she said that she knew it was Amaury before she even turned him over. She said she rolled him onto his back and saw that he had been stabbed with a narrow object all over his abdomen and sliced on the side of his arm. His face was covered from blood where he had coughed up, it was a miracle that he was still alive. She started screaming for us to get help, I did not have the stomach to go in and Daniella was about to faint so I ran up to the nearest cop and had to force him to come to the bathroom. When he entered and saw Yesenia cradling Amaury in her arms he called backup and an ambulance to come ASAP. The school was shut down, the pep rally was shut down and students were forced into whatever classroom was closest until the school was like a desert. All of US were detained in the principal's office, no one told us anything for hours and when the principal finally arrived he sat down behind his desk, his face and neck were red.

Amaury (which he could barely pronounce) is at the hospital, they say he is going to live. Since you all are 18 I am having you sign these gag orders that will keep you from talking about this to the press or anyone who can publish this information…

No, I am not signing anything…

We all jumped at Yessie's reaction to the letters, I could not help but wonder, why this was all such a big secret. Something needed to be done about what happened, someone needed to say something about how we live in these small southern towns in the middle of nowhere expecting to be safe or left alone, but we are constantly harassed by a people who have, no idea whatsoever about where we come from or how we hold their society on our shoulders. I felt hopeless and even though Yessie stood there, proud and defiant, with Alejandro clutching her hand like they were married or some shit, we knew we would leave that office signing those papers. Some of us were born here legally, but our parents? Some of us were not here legally and we were not sure if the school knew or not. These people were writing our recommendations, these people could destroy our lives because of our illegality, our ethnicity, our races and the fact that…hell, most of us were poor as shit and had to work to support out own households. Daniella, who was obviously suffering under the strain, sat down and whispered Yesenia's name. Yesenia's eyes watered up and she clenched her fists…

How could you let them get away with doing this? What have we ever done but get good grades and try to be normal students? Why are we such a secret, why can't anyone talk about what is HAPPENING right under everyone's noses…

The principal began to talk about all of our tentative situations, about how he was protecting us from the media, about how he would hate for the fact that we were not American Citizens to get out into the media as well, who knows who could come knocking on our doors. I am sad to say I was the first to sign, then Alejandro, then Rico, then Daniella, then Jose, then Ryan, then Maria, then Gabriella, then Ernie, then Neto, then Armando and after all of us…Yesenia. She tossed the pen onto the table and he finally let us go. We left the office and began to walk towards the parking lot so we could all give each other rides home in the cars our uncles and fathers found and fixed for us. We had to pass by the bathroom and with the door wide open as if to state that everything was okay, it was sparkling and filled with the smell of bleach and Ammonia. Alejandro stared at it, Yesenia walked inside looking for any sign of what had happened and could not find one stray trace of blood. We continued walking away from the school and once we were outside, all the students were gathered around, waiting for their parents or heading for their cars. As we exited the school, everyone quieted and stared at us: guilty eyes, sad eyes, accusing eyes, eyes that were glad that it happened. I looked ahead and could see the boys from St. Louis who did it being pushed into police cars. We all made it home, Yesenia and Alejandro disappeared for the rest of the week together.

In the end, the Amaury came out alright, physically that is. Yesenia and him saw each other often when he tried to attend another school in the country, but eventually, he had a nervous break-down from thinking that everyone knew it was him or being picked on and his family moved to New York. Later Yesenia would say she ran into him after 4 years hearing nothing and tell me that he was fine, he seemed happy and his scars were not as noticeable, I never asked her how she saw him without his shirt on…but by that time, she had left Alejandro in the dust. The boys accused, got off, we had all signed letters not to talk about it and Amaury, we never knew what he told them. No one talked about it, acknowledged it or wanted to have anything to do with it. We were invisible and so was the attempt at taking his life…it was an amazing thing to watch. Daniella and Alejandro went back to Texas. Yesenia went to a private school. I left the state altogether to go to college in California…the rest of us spread out, we never figured out who the father of Daniella's baby was. Later Yesenia would tell me that Amaury was the Father…I don't know if I believed that or maybe I do.

In our own way we escaped. What happened became a scar on all of our brains. We lost some innocence like everyone does. Lost each other like time does. We learned to keep our eyes open and watch all around us…misunderstanding is the most dangerous monster in the world, it

can drive people to do crazy things, especially when it mixes with pre-developed issues…I still have dreams about that day, I think we all do. I don't trust anyone in this place anymore, not that we really did in the first place.

Candace Nadon
Girlfriend

Now that Sarah was in college and her mother was far away, she could feel the hard place inside of her that housed her secret dissolving. This was just as she had hoped it would be. Even though it was necessary to lie to her mother during her Sunday calls home, conducted at times on that day when her roommate, Trish, was elsewhere, about attending the campus church as she was supposed to, these fabrications seemed miniscule compared to those she had perpetuated since she was a little girl. She felt like a new Sarah, one strong and free, no longer bound by restrictions imposed upon her from her mother. She did not much like to consider that other cowering Sarah, whose image embarrassed her.

There were so many *things* in Boulder: the cobblestone Pearl Street Mall, always crowded with people like she never saw in Glenwood – hippies playing drums outside the café nestled inside the largest bookstore she had ever seen, Japanese chefs hacking into fish and serving it raw, students handing out flyers for Greenpeace, old drunkards begging for change – and that was just one section of Boulder. The best part was that she could actually see these things – could stop and watch the sushi chefs through the window of Zanmei, could browse in any section in the bookstore she wanted - even the New Age one, with its books on past lives and meditation – without fear of her mother reprimanding her for venturing into unchristian territory.

Even walking across the tree-lined campus from her dorm to class was a novel experience. She was surrounded by students that moved past her purposefully, as if they were engaged in important business, which indeed they were: they were engaged in the business of ideas. And she could finally be one of them. The dinner table at home, where her mother had asked her almost nightly what she learned at school that day only to pick apart whatever it was to make sure Sarah wasn't being indoctrinated to believe secular, and therefore dangerous, ideas, was four hours away. Sarah had always done her best to censor the topics covered in her classes to maintain her mother's approval, but a part of her had always resisted. She wanted to tell her mother that a Bodhisattva's sacrifice reminded her of Jesus', just as did Phoenix Jackson's in the short story they read in AP, because these connections were too heady to keep to herself. But every time Sarah ventured such a hypothesis to her mother she saw her mother almost seize up, as if remembering the other words that had slipped from Sarah's mouth two years ago: that she didn't believe in God, and therefore couldn't really be trusted until she did. Her mother would rush to criticize the idea, and Sarah would feel far away from her mother again, her ideas left so tarnished that they no longer appealed to her in the same way.

But now she no longer had to bury her ideas. As she walked to class with Trish on the second Friday in October, the sun's warmth still hinted of Indian summer, even though the vines that crept up the sides of the brick buildings had begun to crumble and the leaves were drying and beginning to shed.

"Do you really need to go to class? You're the only one I know with class on Fridays," said Trish.

"The professor takes a letter from your final grade if you're absent more than three times," Sarah said. She didn't plan on missing any day of Women's Lit.

"Hold on a second," Trish said. They stopped, and Trish dug in her shoulder bag for her cigarettes. Trish made the bag herself from scraps of corduroy and floral printed material. Almost everything Trish had was homemade, even though she could afford almost any kind of clothes she wanted.

"Why not make today one of your days?" She lit a cigarette and blew smoke from the corner of her mouth.

"I'm saving them in case I get sick."

"I wanted you to come up Boulder Canyon with Jeff and his friends."

"Who's Jeff?"

"The guy from the party last weekend." She dragged on her cigarette.

"Oh. Right." Trish already knew so many people. She'd been to parties on the Hill and even got slipped past the bouncer at a bar one night. Sarah doubted Trish ever felt the uncertainty that Sarah did when

Friday loomed and she wasn't sure what her weekend plans were.

"Are you sure you want to go to class? It's such a nice day," Trish said.

"I have to."

"You're so good." She tossed her cigarette on the pavement and ground it out with her Birkenstock.

Sarah shrugged.

"I have to cross here," Trish said. Jeff, no longer a freshman, lived in a house on the Hill.

"Have fun," Sarah said.

"What are you doing tonight?" Trish asked.

"I'm not sure." She adjusted the straps on her overalls, hoping to seem more preoccupied than eager.

"Jeff's having a party – want to come with me?"

"Sure."

"Cool. I'll meet you at the room later," Trish said.

"Okay." Sarah turned away from Trish toward Helms Hall, wondering what Trish meant by later, and hoping she would not forget about her.

. . .

"Let's talk about what's happening with Edna," Dr. Weiss said. Dr. Weiss was young and always wore her dark hair down. It fell past her shoulders and swished in a shiny mass when she turned her head. She taught in jeans and clogs and liked the class to pull their desks into a circle. Dr. Weiss would even sit in one of the student desks, like them, although she usually perched on top of hers, her legs folded underneath each other and her book in her lap. Sarah never thought professors could be like that. She had imagined them all as stuffy, graying old men that didn't bother to learn their students' names. She felt both shy in Dr. Weiss' presence – Sarah's hair never moved gracefully across her shoulders, but stuck out everywhere in loose curls – and desperate to be noticed by her.

"She had an affair," said one of the men – and he did seem to be a man, as he had a full beard. He was an upperclassman, like most of the students in the class. Sarah had been able to take Women's Literature because she passed the AP exam.

Dr. Weiss gave the man the look that teachers gave when they wanted more. The man said, "And now she's doing weird stuff – like not entertaining visitors or spending time with her kids," and fell silent. He sounded bored, as if talking about *The Awakening* was no different than discussing the structure of cells like they were doing in Biology.

Sarah couldn't understand this. She'd read the first half propped against a tree in the courtyard of her dorm because Trish wouldn't stop talking to her in their room, oblivious of the two guys tossing a Frisbee back and forth and the conversations of the small groups of girls dotted around her. Dr. Weiss said it was important to their discussion that they only read the pages she'd assigned and Sarah heeded her instructions only because she feared being discovered and disappointing Dr. Weiss. Their reading assignment ended just as Edna was left alone for the first time, her husband and children both gone. Even though Edna was still sad about Robert's departure, she was happy on her own. Sarah was certain that Edna's initial triumphs would continue: Edna would leave Leonce and finally create a life for herself instead of living under the auspices of her husband.

"Okay," Dr. Weiss said. "This is true. But this is what's happening externally. What about what's happening inside of her?"

The class flipped through their anthologies, which Sarah knew they did when they didn't know the answer, hadn't read, or, like her, didn't want to speak up. Sarah had already opened her book to the part she would discuss if she could get her mouth to open. The pages in their thick books were made of the same thin leaf as Bible pages, and their rustling reminded Sarah of the rush to find a certain verse in youth group. The youth group leader's image appeared in her mind; she pushed it away

before she could remember Jason's nasal voice and before that voice could shift to her mother's, as every Christian voice seemed to.

Dr. Weiss waited. Sarah liked that: she didn't just jump in with the answer like some of her other professors did. She snuck a glance at her teacher, who seemed to be staring at something in the distance. Dr. Weiss caught her eye and smiled. Sarah gave a tentative smile back and stared at her book.

"Sarah, what do you think?" she asked.

"I think…" Her voice seemed so quiet. "I think that she's becoming a new person. It says that it's like she's waking up from a bad dream."

"Fantastic," Dr. Weiss said. "Could you describe how that dream state affected her?"

Sarah had no trouble speaking this time. "She was living two lives, one outside of herself and one inside." She glanced down at her book and read from the passage.

'"Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life – that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions,'" she read. "She wasn't ever able to be who she wanted to be, and now she feels like she can."

Sarah felt as if Kate Chopin was describing her just as much as she was describing Edna. She had two lives too: the public Sarah that assumed the mantle of the Christianity that formed her family's existence, and the private Sarah that had never been able to believe it. The problem was that your inner life didn't like to be relegated to a role offstage, where no one saw it but you. It wanted to be the one on the outside, where everyone could notice it. That had been Sarah's problem: even though she knew that her mother would not love her the same way if she revealed what lay inside of her, her inner life had rebelled and fought its way out. Her mother would destroy that inner non-believing life if she could, and she had indeed tried to stamp it out by sending her to Christian camps and Bible studies. It hadn't worked, and Sarah had been forced to work harder to keep her secrets.

"That's excellent. And it all, of course, connects to Chopin's title, doesn't it?"

Sarah and the rest of the class nodded.

"I'd like everyone to find other passages that support this idea," Dr. Weiss said.

Sarah flipped through her book with the rest of the class, the sound of flimsy pages brushing by each other again filling the room.

"I have one," said Claire. Claire was one of two women in the class that looked the same age as Sarah's mother. She couldn't imagine her mother taking a class like this.

"Great," Dr. Weiss said.

"This talks about what Sarah explained," Claire said. She held up her book.

'"She could only realize that she herself – her present self – was in some way different from the other self. That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment, she did not suspect.'

It's interesting because Edna doesn't even know that she's a new person yet."

Dr. Weiss nodded. "Good. And in the second section of the book, we'll see how she realizes who this new person she's become is and how that affects her life."

Like Edna, she was a new person too. But unlike Edna, Sarah knew it.

…

Sarah never knew what to do with herself at parties. She'd been to a couple with Trish, but after they poured beer from the keg into plastic cups, Trish would float away from her, talking to this person or that. Trish had no problems striking up conversations, but Sarah struggled to

find topics. She'd learned that what she was learning in her classes was off limits, as were politics or anything else having to do with ideas. She didn't know what else to talk about. It seemed like people just chattered, the words leaving their mouths in long fast strings, but Sarah didn't know how to do this. Mostly she just wandered around whatever house the party was held in, looking at the Indian tapestries that hung on the walls and finding reasons to pee so that she could lock herself in the bathroom for as long as she reasonably could before she had to return to the party.

She didn't ever seem to be wearing the right thing either. Here, girls wore corduroy pants that hung beneath their Birkenstock clogs with shapeless dresses that fell to their thighs and cardigans they'd gotten from thrift stores tossed over them. Sarah had always thought that dresses and pants were exclusive of one another. Her mother didn't mind if Sarah's clothes were a little hippie-ish, but Sarah was finding that even her denim overalls weren't quite right because they weren't ripped at the knees or covered in patches.

Sarah knelt down to examine the tall jade plant in Jeff's living room and sat down in front of it. It needed water. She set down her plastic cup, still almost full, on the carpet and fingered the plastic-like leaves. The long chords of the Grateful Dead and the voices of people trying to be heard over the music circled around her and the plant. Trish had been nowhere to be found for an hour now.

"That plant must be telling you something really interesting."

Sarah turned around. The speaker stood above her. He held a brown bottle of beer and the orange end of an unlit cigarette peeked from the black tight curls around his ear.

"I wasn't really talking to it. I mean, I just like plants."

"Maybe you should take this one. It looks like it needs a better home," he said.

"Maybe." She felt strange talking to someone standing while she was sitting, and started to get up.

"Let me help you." He held out his free hand to her. She took it and he pulled her up. His hand was soft and warm and a little sweaty.

"I'm Sam."

"Sarah. I left my beer –"

"I'll grab it for you." He bent down over the plant and picked up the nearly full plastic cup.

"Big drinker," he said, handing it to her.

"I don't really like beer," she said. Again, she'd said something stupid.

"That's good. Keeps you out of trouble."

She laughed. His eyebrows were thick and dark. They made him look like a character from one of the Russian novels she read in AP, like he would know what to do in a snowstorm.

"You look too smart to get into much trouble, Sarah." His voice held the last part of her name, drawing out the 'h' sound.

"Maybe." She glanced around for Trish, both wanting to find her and not.

"I think I'm right." He took a drink of beer and regarded her from behind the bottle. She also took a drink of beer, but just a sip. He had a good nose, just pointy enough to be unusual without dominating his face.

"Maybe," she said. A blonde man slapped Sam on the back.

"There you are," he said. "We're going downtown. You coming?"

"Sure," Sam said. Sarah felt a stab of disappointment.

"I'll meet you out front," Sam's friend said, examining Sarah before he turned around.

"It was nice meeting you," Sarah said.

"Could I call you?" he asked. "Sarah," he said again, the same way he had said it before. This time she didn't think she would mind if he took

the second half of her name with him.

After Sam left, Sarah watched the party dwindle, the older students having left for the bars. She looked for Trish but could not find her and could only assume that she lay behind one of the closed bedroom doors in the back of the house, so she left without her. She half-walked, half-ran from Jeff's house through the bars and coffee shops that lined the Hill's narrow streets on her way back to the campus, hearing every admonition she'd been given about being out alone at night.

Students sprawled on the sidewalk in front of the bar on the corner, smoking cigarettes and chattering. The high pitch of drunken girlish laughter drifted above the low baritone of the men they entertained and followed her as she passed. She thought of Sam, wondering if he stood outside somewhere smoking the cigarette he'd kept behind his ear. She felt the prickling sensation of being watched, but it was not the prickliness that would require her to reach for the rape whistle she'd been given at registration hooked onto her keychain. She imagined Sam's eyes followed her home, observing her as she stepped lightly through the oak leaves on the ground.

...

"Try the chai," Sam said. Sarah took a hesitant sip of the drink he had ordered for her. Chai, she'd learned, was spiced tea and milk steamed together. It tasted like the tea her mother made for her on winter mornings, but sweeter and spicier, like drinking pumpkin pie.

"It's really good," she said. "Different, but good."

"I'd never heard of it before I moved to Boulder. But now I love it."

They sat at one of the little tables on the café's patio, the October air cold enough for Sarah to feel too chilly to take off her grey wool sweater, but not so frigid that it was uncomfortable to sit outside. She hadn't been surprised when Sam called the Sunday after the party and asked her to have coffee with him that evening, even though her voice shook when she agreed to meet him outside her dorm.

"There are a lot of things I didn't know about," Sarah said. She felt it was okay to venture such an admission of ignorance because Sam had done so. "Like sushi."

"Me too – we don't have sushi in Wisconsin," he said. "When I told my mom about it she was afraid I would get sick from eating raw fish."

"Or yoga."

"Or Tai Chi."

"Right – Tai Chi," Sarah said. "What is Tai Chi?"

"Some sort of weird exercise where you wave your arms in the air a lot," Sam said.

"Oh." She could not picture it in her mind.

She couldn't think of any other bizarre thing peculiar to Boulder to mention, so she took a drink from her cup. The cinnamon sprinkled on top of her drink had turned dark and clumpy in the fallen froth. The couple behind them held hands across the table and she wondered if she wanted Sam to hold her hand like that. He'd put his hand on the small of her back when they walked inside the café to order, guiding her to the counter. The touch of his hand on her back made her feel tingly and too warm for her sweater, but it made her nervous, too. She'd always been told to be careful, that one thing easily led to another. The videos they watched in youth group about sex always showed a girl at her locker the morning after she gave up her virginity, her books pressed against her chest and looking alone, like she'd forever lost some essential part of herself that she'd never be happy without.

Sarah didn't know if she really bought that or if it was just another way of scaring them into waiting to be "intimate," as her mother delicately termed it, until they were married. Her friend Rachel lost her virginity their junior year and cried bitterly when her boyfriend broke up with her six months later, but Rachel cried at everything. It was hard to say what sex might do to you, and Sarah hadn't spent much time worrying about it.

She hadn't reason to.

"It's nice when you get to that point, isn't it?" Sam asked, inclining his head toward the couple. "When you get past the awkward stuff?"

"It is." She flushed from her lie and his directness.

"We'd better work on getting to know each other better then," he said. She felt tingly again with a warmth that pushed at her inside places, trying to open them up.

Outside the entrance to her dorm, Sarah tried to think of the right thing to tell Sam in parting. After they left the coffee shop, they'd drifted down the mall. It was easier to talk to Sam when they were walking. She'd told him how much she liked school, and even told him how difficult she found it to understand why Trish didn't. He said he felt the same way about some of his friends; Sarah wondered if the blonde guy from the party was one of them.

After he asked, she told him what it was like to grow up in a little town in the mountains and the creek that ran behind her house. Never before had anyone expressed such interest in Glenwood Springs, and now it seemed changed from a dead end to a haven: a place you would want to live instead of a place you wanted to escape.

"Do you miss home?" he had asked. "It must be hard to be so far from the mountains."

"We have mountains here," she said.

"I know, but it's not the same as having them in your backyard."

"It's nice to be somewhere new." She paused, considering before she spoke again. "And it's nice to be away from my family. Especially my mother."

"Really?"

"I just wanted to be on my own," she said.

"I guess everybody does. Look at that cat." He pointed to a cat the size of a small dog resting in the window of the used bookstore among the display of dusty collections of ghost stories and miniature pumpkins.

"He's huge," Sarah said. They stopped to watch him and he stood close enough to her that his shoulders brushed hers.

But now that it was the end of the date her ease had faded. She could tell he wanted her to say something besides goodbye and she wasn't sure what to say or how to say it. They stood across from one another under a tree a little off to the side of the front door. His face was half lit with fluorescent light from the emergency phone just beyond the tree, the greenish light reflected in part of his curls. She glanced over at the door and pulled her jacket tighter around her, thinking how much warmer she would be inside her little room. The air had changed from a pleasant chill to cold as soon as the sun set.

"Thanks for introducing me to chai,"

"My pleasure. You look cold."

"I am a little."

"I'd better let you go then." He rocked back on his heels.

"Okay." She probably should not have told him she was cold, but she was.

"I had a really good time," he said.

"Me too."

At that he seemed less hesitant, as if he had been waiting for her to concur with him. Sam stepped closer to her, his feet crunching on the fallen dry leaves and leaned into her. She smelled his breath first: milky with spiciness from the cinnamon underlain with the cigarette he'd smoked on their walk back to campus from Pearl Street. His cheek grazed hers and she felt his lips – soft, almost mushy.

Sarah felt his mouth open against hers, almost enveloping it. In turn, she opened hers, thinking that this give and take, push and pull must

be what kissing really was. One of his hands made its way up her back, tugging her closer. Her breasts pressed into his chest and she felt the contrast between their bodies. She needed a place to put one of her hands, too, but instead of placing her hand on his back she let it drift to the loosely wound curls on the back of his neck. His tongue wound into her mouth, but it didn't disgust her as it had the couple of times when she had been kissed before. She hadn't felt like reacting then, not with those sweaty boys that breathed too hard and smelled too much like dirty laundry. Sam's mouth was different, and she twisted her tongue against his. He inhaled sharply and pressed into her back.

She saw then that if she let him, he could open her up from the inside, just as she wanted. He could help her unearth the real Sarah, the one buried inside her, and bring that forth, obliterating the need for the other, more hesitant one. That was why they never wanted you to have sex – they didn't want you to loosen yourself from the cavern that held the true you. Then you would no longer heed their dictates. You would no longer need them. It was what Edna had discovered when she met Robert.

Sam's tongue burrowed more deeply into her mouth, his breath quicker now. His nose brushed against hers and she pulled away from its cold touch. His hand slipped from her back and he drew away from her, as if he thought she no longer wanted to kiss him.

"I'm sorry. Your nose is cold." She reached over and touched the bridge of it with her finger, then let her fingers slide down his cheek.

"I better let you get to bed." His hand ran down her arm but stopped at her elbow, which he held in his palm before releasing it.

Sarah nodded. "Goodnight."

"I'll call you tomorrow."

"Okay." She walked to the door and pressed the security code, knowing that he would wait until the door shut behind her before he walked back through the crumbling leaves.

. . .

Sarah sat across from Sam, trying to make sense of the menu the waiter had handed her. Chutney, somosa, raita – the words were unfamiliar and not terribly inviting, but she didn't want to seem any more naïve than she probably already did – especially after she told him that she'd only seen movies with subtitles at school on their way to the theater. He'd only laughed, but she worried that he would consider her uncultured, uninteresting. She glanced up and saw Sam watching her through his thick eyebrows.

"What're you in the mood for?" he asked.

"I'm not sure."

"This place is the real thing," he said.

"It seems like it." It did, too: all of the waiters looked like the Hindus she'd seen on PBS. Pictures of the elephant god and the one with several waving arms hung from the walls, and some kind of twangy music, like guitar strings strung too tight, played softly in the background. She wondered if all of these new things would someday seem less new, if she would be able to affect Sam's nonchalance.

"Ready to order?" the waiter said in his lilting accent. He looked to Sarah first.

She stared at the menu, waiting for something to jump out at her.

"I think we'll share a few things," Sam said. "Is that okay?" he asked her. She nodded and he rattled off a litany of the words she'd read on the menu.

Sam insisted on paying for dinner, just as he had the movie. They walked back to the dorm in the dark cold. It always seemed darker after daylight savings time ended, maybe because there was so much more darkness than light. They walked close together, their shoulders touching. When they reached the edges of the campus, he reached for her hand.

"I had fun," he said.

"Me too." He held her hand more tightly, and she felt that loosening again – the inner Sarah rising to the surface, just as Edna felt with Robert. Sarah had been dismayed at *The Awakening's* ending: she didn't understand why Kate Chopin had brought Edna so far from everything that bound her to her old life only to have her walk into the sea, unable to live as she really wanted to, but now she saw the book as a warning. Edna hadn't gone about freeing herself in the right way: she let herself loose, but she didn't know enough to gather herself back. You couldn't just subsist in the air between you and another person, no matter how lovely it felt – you could be claimed by others, as Edna had been. Sarah would keep better track of herself.

There were no longer enough leaves on the ground to shuffle her shoes through. The ones that remained were now mushy and pasted against the hard ground, as if they wanted to be absorbed by it so that they no longer lay exposed to the cold air.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. She called her mother between one and two, but Sam didn't need to know this.

"Do you want to walk downtown tomorrow afternoon? We could grab coffee and hit the bookstore."

"Okay," she said.

She could leave her mother a message early, when her parents were still at church, telling them that she had a big test and had to study all afternoon and would call later in the week. Concentrating on his hand in hers, they continued their passage across the nearly frozen ground.

. . .

"How was church this morning?"

Sarah could hear the strains of *The Messiah* on the other end of the phone. As soon as rehearsals began in early November, her mother played her CD of *The Messiah* over and over again, especially the solo that she sang each year in the church's three performances. Sarah had forgotten this, but now she remembered those annoying Sunday afternoons in November: she would be trying to study or talk on the phone only to hear "O Thou That Tellest Good Tidings" restarted every time it ended. But now she no longer had to deal with that: *The Messiah* was just background noise, and Sarah knew she could ask her mother to turn it off if she said the music made hearing her mother's voice difficult.

"I overslept," Sarah said. She pushed her biology textbook out of the way so she could set her elbows on her desk. It was harder to say she'd overslept than just lie and say it was fine, as she had the past two Sundays, but Sarah felt it time to wean her mother from thinking that Sarah might have a religious conversion someday.

"I thought church wasn't until ten thirty," her mother said. "Why would you need to sleep that late?"

"I've had a lot of homework this week. I was just tired." It was true that she had written three papers the week before, but she hadn't gone to church because she didn't want to: she'd gone to a party with Sam and had slept at his house with no intention of telling him she needed to get out of bed early to go to church because her mother, who was four hours away, wanted her to. She hadn't had sex with him yet, which contrary to everything she'd been told about boys from youth group discussions, had not been much of a battle: she'd found herself inside the strange window between giving in too soon and prudishness, although she could sense from Sam's reluctance to keep his hands from moving beneath her pajama bottoms last night that the window was closing. He didn't know she was a virgin.

"Sarah, you know the deal we made." Her mother wanted her to go to a Christian school, but had relented and allowed Sarah to go to Boulder if she promised to attend church.

"I know." Sarah stared out the window. The sky seemed like one big cloud, the way it did when it was going to snow. It looked too cold to go outside.

"Okay then." Sarah heard a cabinet door bang shut.

"What are you doing?"

"Making brownies for your dad." Sarah had a sudden longing to be able to eat those brownies warm from the oven.

"Yum."

"I'll make you some when you're here for Thanksgiving," her mother said. "And anything else you want."

"Really? I'm so sick of dorm food." Thanksgiving wasn't too far away, and she'd been thinking about waking up in her bed at home, which was actually big enough for her to roll around in, and walking downstairs and opening a refrigerator filled with food. It would be quiet there: the only night sounds would be those of the wind moving through the pine and pinion trees of instead of those of cars and drunken boys stumbling home at two in the morning. But she was used to doing what she wanted now, without having to worry that her mother wouldn't let her. And there was Sam, too: he would want to call from Wisconsin and wasn't sure how she would handle that either.

He'd introduced her to a friend of his the other day as his girlfriend. She'd never been called anyone's girlfriend before, and the word thrilled her – it marked her as singled out, as chosen, and better yet, allowed her to define him in her mind as her boyfriend. It gave her a sensation of newness that followed her as she walked to and from class and the cafeteria. She had this *thing* now – this boyfriend. Her mother knew nothing of him. Sam did not fit into that other receding world, just as her mother did not fit into this one.

"I'm sure you are. I'll make sure to feed you well when you're home again. It'll be nice to have you home for a while," her mother said. Her mother sounded almost sad, and Sarah felt guilty for lying to her about church and about not telling her about Sam. That was how it always was: as soon as she steeled herself against her mother, her mother would go and do something nice and it would screw everything up.

"How are your classes?" Another door shut and opened. She pictured her mother pulling out the heavy white mixer and plugging it on the counter next to the microwave like she always did.

"Good. I got an A on my paper on *The Awakening*."

"You read that?"

"For Women's Lit."

"That's a terrible book."

"You've read it?"

"I read it in college and I hated it."

"Because it's sad that Edna can't be free?" Sarah asked.

"Of course not. Because she not only has an affair, she kills herself and abandons her family. And the author glorifies it."

"I didn't think that." She knew she should keep her mouth shut. "I think she was trying to show how few choices women had in those days."

"That is the problem with liberal colleges. They believe morality is anti-intellectual."

Sarah couldn't argue with her mother about morality; that was only asking for her to pack her up and ship her off to some other school where she'd have to go to chapel every morning. The wind had started to blow a little because the bare branches of the trees outside her window shook. November was the ugliest month. Everything had shriveled up and died but wasn't yet covered by the drifts of snow which glossed over the ground and the trees and made you feel cozy and protected inside. Instead, all of the deadness was laid bare, so that you couldn't forget that the trees once had leaves and the grass was once green. She heard the whirr of the mixer through the phone.

"I should let you go," Sarah said. "So you can finish Dad's brownies."

"I need to look at *The Messiah*, too. The performance will be here before I know it. Are you going to be home to see it?"

"I don't think so. I think I'll be studying for finals."

"Oh." Her mother exhaled the word rather than spoke it. Sarah wanted to tell her mother that she would drive home for the weekend, that she could study just as well – and probably better – at home than she could at school, but that was something the other Sarah would do.

"Sorry."

"It's okay. You probably won't see very many more of them. I just need to get used to it." The kitchen noises had ceased. Sarah knew her mother would be staring out the kitchen window at the trees as she did when she came in contact with something out of her control. Sarah had seen her do the same thing when her grandmother got really sick.

"I guess so." The other Sarah pushed against her, frightened that her mother was slipping away from her, but this Sarah, the Sarah that stared out the window at the barren trees, this Sarah that was a girlfriend, shoved the old Sarah away.

. . .

"I think you should stay here tonight," Sam said to Sarah. He called not long after she hung up the phone with her mother, when she still sat at her desk watching the bare trees bend in the wind that was blowing in whatever storm approached. He wanted her to come over and study, which gave her an excuse not to stay in her room to fret about her mother. But studying turned into dinner of delivered pizza which turned into watching a video on the couch, and now it had grown late.

"I have an early class, and I don't have any of my books."

"I'll get you up. It's already snowing pretty hard," he said, peering out the little window in his living room. "Do you really want to walk home in that?"

"I grew up in the mountains, remember?"

"It's going to be cold tonight."

"I have one of my mom's super warm quilts on my bed." Her mother's name slipped from her mouth, leaving the metallic taste of guilt behind. Again, she saw her mother standing before the kitchen window.

"If you really want to go home, go home," Sam said. "I just thought it would be fun to ride out the first big snowstorm of the year together."

"I was only teasing. I'll stay."

"I promise I'll keep you warm," he said. He picked the empty pizza box off the coffee table to throw away. Sarah stacked their empty plates and followed him into the kitchen.

After they got into bed Sam switched off the lamp. Sarah lay on her back, watching the orange tip of the stick of incense he'd lit move slowly downwards as it burned. The incense's muskiness drifted around the sweet boy sweat of his sheets.

Sam leaned into her, throwing a leg over hers. "Come here."

She turned towards him and he put his arms around her shoulders.

"Aren't you glad you stayed?

She kissed him instead of answering, running her hand down his legs where they were bare below his boxers. His mouth moved away from hers and onto her neck. She couldn't remember him doing that before, and she arched her back from the ticklish pleasure. Her body felt warmed from the inside and looser, malleable, like she had unearthed something long dormant. She brushed her hand up Sam's leg, so that it ended up underneath his boxers. It was sweaty there at the juncture where his thighs met, and she'd read enough Judy Blume to know that she wouldn't have to do much to encourage him, even though she wasn't sure what to do with it. It seemed crass to hold the whole thing in her hand – it too much mimicked the gestures that boys in high school made when they thought something was stupid – so she ran the tips of her fingers across it, circling around the giant vein on the other side.

He took one of her breasts in his mouth and she twitched from the pleasure of it.

"What's wrong?" he asked, moving his mouth away.

"Nothing." She kissed him and he slipped his hand underneath her boxers and between her legs. Again, there was that jolting warmth.

He pulled off her boxers. "Is this okay?"

"Yes."

"I'll go get something then."

"Okay." He got out of bed and rummaged in a drawer. She turned on her back and spread her body open.

Sam pulled the covers back and slid next to her. He kissed her neck again and moved on top of her and she shifted her hips towards him. It hurt. It felt like she was being split down the middle.

Her body eventually adjusted to him, and the weight of his body rose and fell against hers, his chest sticky with sweat, breath quick and hollow. He grabbed for her hands and clutched them, pulling her arms away from her body. He was holding on too tightly - she wanted to loosen her fingers, but they were mired with his. He was too much inside of her, too much around her, and she could not feel herself anymore. In *The Awakening*, she'd pictured Robert delicately plucking the new Edna from the chest of the old, drawing her forth and setting her free, and in her imaginings of her own rising she saw Sam doing the same thing: he would step aside and let her surface, not try to keep her body covered beneath his.

Edna must have realized this too, only later, after Robert left, after she finally saw that he was no different from her husband or her children: they all defined her as they wanted and refused to modify their depictions. That was why she stepped into the sea; she wanted those names washed away. Sam was no different than her mother, really. It was only one word replaced by another: she was *daughter*, defined, and now *girlfriend*, similarly defined and created, neither word leaving room for her, for Sarah.

. . .

After it was over, Sam got up to use the bathroom, and Sarah curled on her side. When he came back to bed he wrapped himself around her, his arms around her waist, the front of his body pressing into the back of hers.

"Sarah," he said. "You're lovely."

It did not flatter her as much as it once had: she was lovely to him, but only because he had decided she was, only because she had behaved the way he wanted her to. He fell asleep then and his breaths grew deep and long.

Sarah no longer wanted to be naked. She moved Sam's hand from her waist and set it gently beside him so he wouldn't wake and crept out of bed, feeling her way in the dark room until she found the chair which held her folded clothes. She pulled on her jeans and sweater, stuffing her bra and her underwear in her back pocket.

The world outside was transformed by snow: it covered the sidewalk and the dead leaves beneath the trees. Fat flakes fell in heavy globs from the sky. Everything was still and quiet in the way it became when blanketed by snow. Sarah stood and watched the snowflakes fluttering around the light pole. In the orange glow she saw how they twisted in wild circles instead of just falling straight down to the ground like she'd always assumed.

She knew Sam would no longer call her his girlfriend when he woke to find her missing, but it was all right. She would become something else to him, but it would be what he called her in absentia. It would not be a name she would hear. Her hair had begun to get wet from the snowflakes that had melted there. She shook her hair free of the ones that remained crystalline and put her hat on, pulling it low over her ears before she walked back to her room, held by the insular world of the hushed, falling snow.


Creative
Nonfiction

Hayley Gallagher
Sing Us a Song

You live your life in the songs you hear on the rock and roll radio.
–Helen Reddy, "Angie Baby"

My father always drives long distances with a small diet-coke filled cooler and at least two bags of honey mustard pretzels at his side; when the pretzels run out, he switches to peanut M&Ms. He snacks to stay awake when the rest of us drift off to sleep.

For the first part of any trip, adrenaline prevails throughout the back of the car and my cousin, sisters, and I chatter and giggle and play games with license plates and alphabets. Eventually, though, the time of the trip arrives when everyone retreats to their personal headphones and chapter books, and when Mom pulls a blanket up over her shoulders and settles in to a soft snore. I get motion sickness easily, so I resign to staring quietly out the window or, when I can manage it, a nap. This is the time when Dad plays his music: hits by *Simon and Garfunkel*, *Boston*, and Billy Joel, to name a few.

On this particular drive, we had stopped for a late dinner at a combination Burger King/Pizza Hut somewhere along I-75 between Atlanta and Cincinnati, eaten our French fries and pepperoni pizza, and piled back into our green minivan for the rest of the drive home. The nine-hour trek between the two cities was a familiar one, as before some of us grandkids entered high school, missing classes or afternoon practices wasn't much trouble and schedules were much more permitting for short visits to my mother's extended family. The only unusual part of this trip was that we were driving through the night instead of the day to get home—for what I can't remember—and that we stopped to eat at a Burger King instead of a Wendy's.

As we pulled out of the parking lot, I propped my pillow up against the side door and prepared to fall asleep. Dad reached across the center console and turned on the car stereo.

The sound of a piano's strong walking bass line and the simultaneously melodic and percussive harmonica inspired something in my memory and I began to sing along, crescendoing into a full serenade by the first chorus.

Sing us a song, you're the piano man
Sing us a song tonight
Well we're all in the mood for a melody
And you've got us feeling alright.

I don't remember having ever really listened to the song before and I had no idea it was Billy Joel's voice I was following, but I nonetheless sang along with unexpected accuracy.

"I didn't know you knew this song," my mother said, twisting her body around in the front seat to face me. Neither did I.

While I enjoyed my mother's reaction to my spontaneous karaoke, I snuck a searching glance towards the review mirror. Did I also invoke one of Dad's smiles? Which one was it—the slight grin which kept the details of his feelings secret, or the teeth-bearing, eye-twinkling smile which revealed all?

In an effort to extend my time in the spotlight, I attempted to join Billy on the next song, "Movin' Out." The swift swat of a pillow ended my encore—one performance had been enough for my cousin Kara. She went to sleep in peace, and shortly after, so did I.

"Piano Man" was not my first performance; in fact it was one of my last. Sometime after that glorious night I outgrew the fearlessness it takes to sing shamelessly in front of a group and found my timid side. When I stop to think about it, I am surprised at how often I sang without any attention to who might be listening—before the days of *American Idol* and *So You Think You Can Dance?*, before *Hannah Montana* and *High School Musical* transformed superstardom from a young girl's faraway dream to an attainable ambition. I sang like people do in their cars with the windows rolled up, only I was in my living room without anything remotely soundproof to protect me.

My repertoire could be divided into two categories: the Broadway tunes I sang on Saturdays while cleaning my room—which

I played on my very own boom box, with the door closed—and Dad's Music, hits from the sixties and seventies that I learned from riding in the car with my father.

When it came to indoor concerts, *ABBA* was my specialty. My young musical ear found an appreciation for the harmonies the group is known for, but I'm sure that most of their appeal came from "Dancing Queen." I would turn up the volume on the living room stereo and wait for Anni-Frid and Agnetha to sing to me.

You are the dancing queen, young and sweet, only seventeen.

I was seven, not seventeen, but I claimed my crown nonetheless, shuffling my bare feet rhythmically across the hardwood floor.

Feel the beat from the tambourine.
You can dance, you can jive
having the time of your life
see that girl, watch that scene
dig in the Dancing Queen

I took the words to heart, twirling so that my dress skirt would billow out into a bell shape, and singing with an equally full voice. I could sustain my energy through several of *ABBA's* hits, but I almost never got past track six on the *ABBA Gold* album:

Tonight the Super Trouper lights are gonna find me
shining like the sun
smiling, having fun
feeling like a number one.

My second stage was the car, which I think most closet singers find safer than the shower (unless, of course, you are stopped at a traffic light and the surrounding drivers can see you drumming on the steering wheel and belting out the words to a song they can't hear). I remember sitting in the front seat of my dad's champagne colored Lexus, my small frame overwhelmed by the amount of leg room and my blue eyes peering just over the glove compartment to the road ahead, singing:

Delta Dawn, what's that flower you have on
Could it be a faded rose from days gone by
And did I hear you say, he was a-meetin' you here today
To take you to that mansion in the sky.

Helen Reddy's song was perfect in that it repeated the same chorus over and over again, with the occasional change in key. I could never keep up with the wordiness and pace of the verses in the songs Dad played, so I only chimed in with the chorus lines and my favorite phrases from the rest.

The songs I adopted into my repertoire were chosen for three reasons: these "favorite phrases," which said something I thought sounded silly, a danceable rhythm, and melodies and harmonies with impressive stage presence (i.e.; I felt like a superstar when I sang them). It also helped if the melodic line stayed within the range of the alto voice I inherited from my mother. The song's actual meaning meant nothing, which explains why I was singing about potentially insane and/or seductive women, among other things.

I loved Simon and Garfunkel's *koo-koo-ka-choo* "Mrs. Robinson" for its lavish use of nonsense words, as well as their number three Billboard hit, "I am a Rock" *I am an island*. Jim Croce was my hero simply because he wrote about spitting into the wind and about *Bad, Bad, Leroy Brown*, who I am very disappointed to say has no connection to Encyclopedia Brown whatsoever. Jimmy Buffet's classic "Cheeseburger in Paradise" frequented the stereo, especially if my sisters were in the car so that the three of us could sing about a favorite food together.

I didn't begin to notice the connection Dad's Music made between my father and me until middle school, when I reached page twenty-three in my piano book. He almost always drove Sarah, Jamie, and me to our piano lessons, and in our usual post-lesson conversation, I told him that my recital piece was going to be "The Entertainer."

"Cool!" Dad exclaimed, the full, toothy smile appearing on his face. "I can't wait!" We listened to Marvin Hamlisch's full band version on the way to my next lesson, at my request.

I hadn't realized that Scott Joplin's piano rag was on my father's "favorites" list and suddenly felt bashful that I would be performing the piece in front of him. I practiced at home, trying to ignore my peripheral vision, which I feared would reveal his figure standing in the dining room doorway. I felt like a little girl again, who suddenly stops everything when she notices a smiling adult spying on her.

The day of the recital came and I felt the added pressure as my left hand hopped between chords in the bass line and my right hand stretched to accommodate all of the notes in the right-hand melody. I was happy to play for Dad, and I felt as thought I was rewarding him for the lessons he and Mom had finally allowed me to take, but I was shy of the extra attention. Something in his broad smile made me smile, too, but it also made me blush.

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon
Little boy blue and the man in the moon

I prefer my father-daughter moments to be un-sensational. I feel guilty rejecting a dance with my father by casting my eyes to the floor, but I find just as much meaning in a hug or a simple conversation. The night I sang with Billy Joel on the way home from Cincinnati, I awoke some time in the middle of the night. The car was silent except for the clicking of our tires across the highway seams. I rested quietly, my head against the window and my eyes focused on the road ahead. The car in front of us was a white minivan with a small television that descended from the roof. My dad gradually closed the distance between our car and theirs.

"You're getting awfully close, there," I said.

"I'm trying to figure out what they're watching."

Silence resumed for a few more moments as we both attempted to discern which cartoon figures were dancing across the tiny screen.

"It looks like either *Antz* or *A Bug's Life*."

"Really?" Dad replied, "I was thinking *Toy Story*."

I studied for a bit longer before my eyes became heavy again. Dad eventually allowed more and more distance between our car and theirs. I went back to sleep.

When my eyes were stabbed by a flash of a neon light
That split the night
And touched the sound of silence.

Writing about Dad's music is difficult, partly because my memories are as fragmented as the pieces of lyrical lines *big ole ruby red dress* that pop into my head, and mostly because the songs mean so much to the way I think about our relationship.

My relationship with my father is not strained or complicated. We do not live far apart, and I can always call him if my computer stops working or if I can't figure out how to fill out my tax form, if my car battery dies because I leave the lights on, or if I don't understand why my roommate doesn't know how to load the dishwasher. I am lucky because becoming a woman has not meant leaving daughterhood behind.

Even so, writing about Dad's music is hard because I am still looking for the smile in the review mirror, the one that I strive to put there; I am writing to put it there. I am writing to say that I remember sitting in the front seat on the way to the store, singing "Delta Dawn" or "Hopelessly Devoted to You," that I remember Jimmy Buffet's *big kosher pickle and cold "grass" beer*, and that I remember speculating on the television preferences of the kids in the white minivan while driving down I-75 at night. I am writing, Dad, to say thank you.

Chelsea Guenther
Continuity

"Caroline, would you be my replacement mom?" I was mostly joking.

"Sure, honey, would you like me to make you an Easter basket?"

"Oh no, don't worry about it. That would be too much." I laughed, because as a college student, no one had given me an Easter basket in years.

I showed up at the church Saturday morning to help her put up the children's art in the sanctuary.

She fished out quarters from her office, overflowing with books about Christian Education. I sipped on a Diet Coke while she had a regular Coke, sitting in the wooden house of God, and taped children's renderings of trees, butterflies, and flowers to the wall behind the main altar. We chatted about seminary and the history of the church where I have found a quiet sense of belonging while away from home for college.

On my way out, she handed me an Easter basket and a grocery bag full of smaller bags of Easter candy.

"I thought it would be fun for you to play Easter bunny on your hall," she said, grinning.

Complete with green fake plastic grass, a whole chocolate bunny, and a stuffed bunny, the basket was perfect, reminiscent of my childhood. So overwhelmed by her thoughtfulness, I could barely utter a thank you. Once in the car, sitting behind the steering wheel in the sun on that clear, beautiful spring morning, the familiar flood of gratitude, sadness, and joy washed over me. I even allowed myself to cry.

The bunny now sits next to me on my bed, on the edge by the windowsill. A small pink monkey that my mom gave me when she was sick sits on the windowsill right behind it, reminding me of the woman who gave birth to me and loved me with everything she had.

It was not just an Easter basket and bunny that Reverend Caroline Leach gave me that day. They are much more—tokens of a deeper love, physical reminders that though I am motherless, I am really not. Women still watch over and care for me. Momma lingers in the small things, which was her way.

The ways in which I miss her are endless. A mother is more than a mother, someone who gives birth and kisses boo-boos and makes school lunches, but life itself. Momma held up my family and the way I viewed myself and everything around me. She was the sun I orbited around. She kept me together. I wish I had understood all this before so I could have thanked her, but I did not. I was only sixteen.

Kate doesn't remember how she met me. I don't remember how I came to know the college chaplain, either. She says I must have appeared in her office one day during my first fall at Agnes Scott College and said something to the effect of "I'm Chelsea, I'm Presbyterian and from Memphis."

I remember telling her about my mom's death, about my family, about how I was struggling. As often happens when I tell the story, tears forced their way out of me and then spilled beyond my control.

January 2005. I was sixteen, a junior in high school. Cathy Guenther, my momma, was diagnosed with stage-four lung cancer. By then, the cancer was far advanced—it had metastasized to her brain, which caused her to have vision problems and strange headaches. One day she started having episodes where she lost her vision completely. My dad took her to the emergency room. Days later, the diagnosis: cancer. Stage-four. What did that mean?

Nobody told me that stage-four means the chances are not good.

She couldn't die. She would fight the cancer and win.

August 2005. Still sixteen. I returned home from camp only to find a weak, very sick version of my mom. After being gone most of the summer, I was so confused by her appearance. Surely this would pass; my mom was stronger than sickness. It was all too much for me. Instead I worried about getting my summer reading done.

August 7, 2005. Mom felt extremely sick most of the day. Dad took her to the hospital in the late afternoon. Sometime during the night,

her blood pressure dropped so low there was no blood flow to her brain. She went into a coma. The doctors did tests. The tests showed that there was no electrical activity in her brain.

Those are the things I was told and the small snippets still in my memory.

I still do not really know what all of that means.

But I clearly remember what "no electrical activity" felt like. It was in the afternoon. Dad had taken her in to the hospital the night before. I came too late. As my dad and I stood in the room, it didn't feel like anyone else was there, though Mom lay on the bed in front of us. Her soul was absent. Gone. Deep down, I already knew what the doctors had said after all the tests: she would probably never wake up.

Wednesday, August 10, 2005. Evening. The doctors took her off life support. I was not invited to be in the room, but I asked to be there. My dad, my two little brothers, and I stood around her bed as the beeping of her heart rate monitor faded in waves into a single monotonous note. I fell into the arms of friends and family. All a teary blur.

Those are the ugly, raw facts. I still have to muster all my strength—the strength my momma planted in me—to try not to cry when I tell the story. I am crying now.

I would tell you more about what it felt like to watch my mom fight cancer, but I can't. It has been a few years, but it is still too hard.

Besides, you don't really want to know.

Ms. Jean Ann was my second mother before I even needed one. The girls in my Girl Scout troop came to call her "McMommy," a clever play on her last name, McBride, based on the way we were all like her daughters. I joined the troop she led in the fourth grade and stayed with her until high school graduation. Nine years.

A few days after that awful Wednesday night, she brought my family a seemingly lifetime supply of paper products—toilet paper, paper towels, napkins. She somehow knew that we already had more casseroles from the ladies at church than our fridge could contain.

Hayley and I have worked at camp together for the past three July's. Her dad died about a year before my mom did. Also from cancer. Because of Hayley, because of me, because of everyone I know whose lives have been devastated because of cancer, I cringe every time someone says that awful word.

We have spent many nights avoiding sleep while talking about life without our parents. It is almost easy to talk to her about my mom. Although most of my other friends are supportive, they do not understand.

Unfortunately, Hayley does.

While at an outlet mall in some unmemorable city outside of Dallas, I bought my senior prom dress. My dress needed to be relatively inexpensive, because I paid for it with money earned from my job as a cashier.

Mom and I went shopping at Macy's in the fall of my junior year for a dress to wear to my friend's fall formal. It was burgundy underneath, covered in sheer black fabric that was beaded. It was beautiful.

When Daniel came to pick me up from my house that May for junior prom, Mom had already lost her hair. She wore a hat to cover her bald head. She looked weak. I tried to ignore the fact that she didn't have eyebrows anymore. She looked so strange without them.

The next April, I was trying on dresses and had only my friends to tell me whether or not they flattered my body. I don't trust my friends very much when it comes to their opinions about clothes.

Momma had impeccable taste. She was put together and frugal.

I decided on a simple dark blue, almost navy cocktail dress. At $95, it was a steal.

After returning home from Texas, I had a shoe crisis. My Aunt Carolyn, little sister of my daddy, dropped by the house to show me some shoes she had picked up at Macy's that she thought would go with

the dress. This was a relief, a lifeline. I went upstairs to try on the dress with the shoes, while she waited at the kitchen table. She met me at the bottom of the stairs.

Tears quickly formed in her eyes.

"You look so beautiful, I wish your momma could be here to see you."

Me too.

Just four days before leaving for my first year of college, friends and family gathered for dinner to celebrate my eighteenth birthday, and I made sure to invite Ms. Jean Ann. She gave me Girl Scout cookies to share in the dorm, a car repair kit (a very practical gift), and a gorgeous silver pin, a donkey, that she had gotten while our troop was on our trip to Our Cabaña, one of the four Girl Scout World Centers in Cuernavaca, Mexico.

It was one of my dreams that we would go to Mexico. Ms. Jean Ann inspired me to dream big dreams because she believed in me. My troop raised all the money required to go on the trip and went the summer my mom was sick.

Much of my life continued on as usual after Mom died. The world was so different and yet the same. I still went to school, still did my homework, still got mostly A's. Somehow, achieving my dreams was still my main focus.

In the fall after Mom died, my friend and I began work on our Girl Scout Gold Award project, the highest award in Girl Scouting. Ms. Jean Ann helped and encouraged us every step of the way.

I earned my Gold Award for my mom, for Ms. Jean Ann, for everyone who has ever believed in me. People said then, as they have many times since then, "Your mom would be so proud of you."

Patrick was an awkward computer engineering major at Georgia Tech and my first college boyfriend. Most of my friends liked him, and I thought I liked him, too. Were I home and not away at college, I would have taken him home to meet my parents, though it is just Dad now. The urge to call my mom and chat with her about Patrick nagged at me. My other friends chatted with their moms about so many things, but I couldn't.

I had Kate, though.

One night, I convinced Patrick to come babysit with me. In my mind, this was convenient, as he would be able to meet Kate when she came home. Nervous but also excited about their meeting, I didn't tell Patrick any of this. He wouldn't have understood.

Kate and her husband Justin came home; the four of us chatted for a bit.

Back at school, I went to pester Kate in her office as usual, eager for her verdict.

"I liked him. He actually talked to us."

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Many people sent me cards after Momma died.

Chelsea, I wanted you to know my thoughts are with you. I lost my mother to cancer three years ago. I watched her suffer for five years. Even though it's never easy to lose someone we love, there is comfort in knowing they are no longer suffering. I still think of my mom daily and miss her greatly, but it has gotten easier. I know you are a strong, capable young lady who will always make your mom proud. Don't forget it's ok to still be a girl some days. And never lose sight of the dreams your mom had for you.

You're in my thoughts-

Lori

Lori worked for Memphis' Girl Scout Council. We had talked before and spent a small amount of time together at Girl Scout-related events, but she had no special personal connection to my family or me. Yet she had taken the time to share with me, an act that overwhelmed me with its generosity. Her words comforted me.

A friend gave me a pink journal a few days before or after Mom

died. I no longer write in it, but it is still necessary to have it with me. In the back of the journal are important notes from friends, cards, a poem from an ex-boyfriend. I like knickknacks and hold onto pieces of paper that carry layers of meanings.

Lori's card is in the back of my pink journal. An honored place.

Today I am twenty, but in many ways I am still a girl, a child who needs to be loved. A girl who cries over love in the form of knickknacks.

During my first Christmas break home from college, Ms. Jean Ann's daughter Katie gave birth to her second child, Callie. Ms. Jean Ann took me to see the baby a week or two later. I felt privileged to be included in the activities of her family, like I belonged. While holding Callie, the wonder of holding a tiny human amazed me but also saddened me. My mom will never hold my children.

Part of me doesn't want to have children because I am afraid of entering the world of motherhood without my own mother. Watching Katie and Ms. Jean Ann, I began to wonder who will pass on to me all the motherly knowledge and secrets required to raise a child. When and if the time comes, though, "Ms. McMommy" will share some tips in her own way. Over the years, she has taught me how to sell Girl Scout cookies, cook over a fire, solve conflicts, and live with integrity. She leads by example.

She has only said that she loves me a few times over the eleven years that we have known each other, but that is just how she is. She loves me. She will always be there. She will always be proud of me. She is my McMommy, and I am one of her daughters.

"Have you felt your mom's presence since she's been gone?" Hayley asked.

One day there was a bird in her grandma's house in Memphis, where she lived for a year after her dad died. Hayley swears the bird was her dad's spirit.

I thought. All I could remember feeling since Mom died was numbness. Emptiness. I wanted to know that my mom's soul was around somewhere, too.

Then it came back to me.

San Isidro, Honduras.

A mission trip. People from our church had been going there for several years, so the local church knew us, welcomed us, loved us as brothers and sisters.

A church with white plastic lawn chairs instead of pews. Filled with the soul of its people, who seemed, to this outsider, to know how to love without condition or pretense and live joyfully without an abundance of material things.

One service made me cry and cry and cry. Who knows what made the tears come, maybe it was the songs and prayers, in a mix of Spanish and English, or maybe it was just God pulling at my heart. All of it, beauty unknown to me, made me think of my mom and tear up. We stood to pray and hold hands with new friends, and one woman took me into her arms. The walls that usually surround my heart fell, and I sobbed.

I do not know her name. I do not remember what she looked like, only what her embrace felt like. It felt like a mother's love. It felt like my mother's love.

God bless her.

One of the first stories I told Kate was how my mom died, but it was not the last.

Countless times, I have wandered into Kate's office, plopped into

a chair, started talking about life, and wound up in tears. Letting the tears come hurts. For minor problems, she just gently pushes the tissue box towards me. Sometimes she cries with me. Last time I had a good cry in her office, she came and pulled up a chair in front of mine, held me, and cried with me. Sometimes this is what I need most.

Someone to listen to me, like Momma listened to me. The kind of listening that hears what I'm saying as well as what I'm not. Often, there's not much to say. The tone of her voice and the love in her clear blue eyes assures me that everything will be better, eventually.

I am embarrassed by my need.

Some days I acknowledge that pain; many days I try to ignore it. Her absence is a gaping hole composed of both big things and small things—chatting, dress shopping, encouragement, hugs, unconditional love… everything. Yet there is a web of women who all fill in that hole with a little bit of their love. Though Momma can no longer love me here, I am still more loved than I can fathom. They hold me up.

Grief manifests itself in tears and anger at God and jealousy of those who are lucky enough to still have their mothers, but as I travel this painful journey,

I am not alone.

Momma was already gone before I even realized she was going. I did not get to say good-bye. I didn't tell Momma how much she meant to me, how much I loved her.

I thank her now by thanking the web of women in my life. Though they do not know it, they are Momma, as am I. My daughters and granddaughters will be her, too.

Thank you, Momma.

Ms. Patty and I lead the Girl Scout troop at the church. She is retired, and all her children have left the house and graduated college. I am a confused, sleep-deprived college student. We are quite the pair.

To be honest, she does all the work, and I just show up to help out. Being around the girls in our troop makes me feel like I've done something useful for the world besides studying.

For Valentine's Day, she made all the girls little envelopes with pictures of them at the activities we had done thus far in the year. She made a present for me, too. That familiar feeling of gratitude flooded me when I read the accompanying card:

Legends say that hummingbirds float free of time, carrying our hopes for love, joy, and celebration. The hummingbirds' delicate grace reminds us that life is rich, beauty is everywhere, every personal connection has meaning and that laughter is life's sweetest creation.

Hally Joseph
Summer Camper

I never went to summer camp. That's not entirely true: I went to wimp summer camp, and – if we're going to be honest – I couldn't even handle that. My grandparents paid a lot of money for my cousin and I to attend a week-long zoo camp one summer, but after spending the first three days cooped up in a classroom learning about the characteristics of arthropods and mammals, we decided we needed a day off and we called in sick. Geniuses that we were, we requested to spend our zoo camp skip day at the zoo, where we actually ran into our fellow campers going on a guided tour of the arthropods and mammals. I smiled beatifically at our camp leaders, trying to make my eyes say that I was so in love with the zoo that even my illnesses could not restrain me from its lovely walls, then turned back to the lions, no doubt muttering a 9-year-old version of, "Damn zoo camp."

A few summers later my brother, his best friend, and I signed up for a YMCA horseback-riding camp. Upon arrival, we were immediately split up. I was given a worn volleyball and sent to a sandy court with a bunch of muscled girls, while my brother and his friend spent the morning falling out of canoes at the lake. By lunchtime, the frazzled teenage counselors realized we had not signed up for volleyball or canoeing camp and brought us to the horses, where we learned we would only be riding them for half an hour every day. The rest of our day would be comprised of swimming in the crowded pool and making lanyards and God's-eyes in the arts and crafts area. Our parents were hardly surprised when the three of us said we were very, very sick and could not return to camp the next day.

My first stab at an overnight camp was a soccer camp at Berry College. Thinking that I would be getting a college dorm experience combined with soccer skills while simultaneously braving my fear of overnight camps, I felt like I was killing a flock of birds with one well-aimed stone. If anything, that stone ricocheted off the flock and smacked me in the head. The five-day experience resulted in a broken toe, a loss of faith in my soccer abilities, and an intense doubt of ever surviving college.

With such experiences behind me, it was obvious to me that I was not cut out for the *Parent Trap* type of camp that many girls dreamed of. If I failed at zoo camp, God only knew how I would survive in a log cabin, with spiders crawling on my toes at night. Giving into my camp failures, I receded into a life of air-conditioning, make-up, and minimal physical duress, but I secretly regretted that I had not been that girl who packed a duffel bag and went to summer camp in the mountains of North Carolina. I had never aimed a bow and arrow, never sang songs around a campfire, never met my long-lost twin. No one would be making movies about me.

So when I was looking for a summer job the year I was nineteen and a reputable girls' summer camp marched its way into my life via an online ad, I sent in my application. I submitted three glowing letters of reference and had an hour-long phone interview with the camp's staff coordinator. In the interview she vehemently warned me that being a camp counselor would be rough, that it would be exhausting work without any privacy. After someone says "it's hard work" about twelve times, one should know it's time to politely turn down the job, but instead I confidently said, "Yes, yes I can handle that." What I really was thinking was, "I mean, I *probably* can handle that." How was I to know if I could survive camp counseling, if I had never known real summer camp? This seemed like a feasible argument for my chances of survival, so I signed a contract for the entire summer and put it out of my mind until June 2, 2008 rolled around and I got in my car to drive 3.5 hours to Brevard, NC. I felt more like a camper than a counselor as I packed my trunk and looked over the activities I'd be teaching. At least I'd be getting paid to be there, unlike the children paying the equivalent of my MacBook to spend three weeks in the wilderness. At least from that angle, it seemed like I was getting the better end of the deal.

To the rest of the world who, like me, has never known the authentic American summer camp experience, I can now verify that it exists. And it's even more real than you can imagine. Like a movie, it has cool green lakes where long-forgotten flip-flops rest at the bottom. Shorts are the daily attire and showering is overrated, although your counselors will try to convince you otherwise. Breakfasts of sugary cereals

fuel a day of nonstop activities, and the evenings are peppered with silly events. "Surprise" square dances are held with the boys' camp across the lake, causing a screaming frenzy that will dissipate into subsequent make-up explosions and the trying-on of potential outfits. The square dance will take place on a tennis court beside a lake at sunset, with horses watching from behind their fence like commentators in the field of preadolescent love. Back at camp, sports tournaments dominate the last week as the camp play runs through its final rehearsals, to be performed before an audience of adoring parents. Best friends are made within minutes and will last through letter-writing for months or even years after you can no longer remember what it felt like to fall asleep to the sound of crickets.

And oh, it was bad, too. Five-inch wide wolf spiders crept down the walls causing midnight shrieking fests. Campers erupted into tears because someone had carved "a girl died in this bed and her ghost will haunt it *forever*" into the wall by their pillows. Young campers had bodily fluid accidents in the night, old campers tried to talk about sex with their counselors, and the ones in the middle begged incessantly for the attention the other two age groups were receiving. By the end of each week, I was craving my night off so badly that I was almost blinded by desire. Suddenly, WalMart became a luxurious wonderland where I could use a private bathroom, bask in air conditioning, and buy enough Diet Cokes to caffeinate my entire summer. Cars became euphoric vehicles of escapism that could take me somewhere where I could curse and laugh and watch violent films, films where the protagonists' kissing did not lead to a flowery happily ever after but to a sex scene. To think my life had once been that way all the time – capable of trashy movies, languid napping, and a musical selection that did not include *Hannah Montana* – shocked me as I returned to another week of exhaustion, callused feet, and the strict camp schedule that now had total power over me.

Eleven weeks later, I drove home from camp and back into my life. I put my Chacos safely away in the back of my closet. I shaved my legs in a hot shower. I put on mascara and a dress, and sat in the air conditioning of my house, feeling how soft the carpet was beneath my toes and how quiet the room was. I felt like I had returned home from a war but with none of the credit. When people asked what I had done all summer, I couldn't begin to describe how I had spent eleven weeks in the mountains, singing songs around cafeteria tables sticky with syrup and fleeing from leaping spider-crickets lovingly known as "sprickets." I couldn't tell them about the days I had spent swimming beneath waterfalls and how, when my favorite campers departed for home, I cried watching them go. Instead, I just smiled and said, "I worked as a camp counselor at a summer camp," and they nodded, like they knew exactly what I meant.

Which is what I would've done before that summer, as well. I had thought I knew what summer camp was but now I know better. After all those years of zoo camps that hardly utilized the zoo, horseback riding camps that never went near the horses, and soccer camps that lost the love of the sport, I somehow wound up at a summer camp that focused on the one thing most camps forget about: summertime. I spent an entire summer climbing mountains, swimming in lakes, making s'mores around campfires, and sitting on a hillside just to soak up the sunlight. It was the most challenging summer of my life and an experience I was wholly unprepared for – but honestly, who can be prepared for a camper who has insomnia or a night where a wolf spider lays 500 wriggling spider-babies in the staff lounge? And although I will always remember camp's many horrors and all the nights I was so tired that I simply wished for it to be over, it taught me how to appreciate my life in the real world. It taught me the loveliness of a queen size bed, of forbidden adult words, of the presence of men in my life, of the deliciousness of home-cooked food, and of the privilege of making my own decisions. It was the Parent Trap experience I had been avoiding my entire life, right down to the archery and cabin pranks, and I had survived it. And, in the end, I met my twin after all. She was a tough girl: the kind who can wrangle a cabin full of kids, wear no make-up and raft down the Nantahala River, and not scream at the sight of a huge black snake. She directed the camp play all summer, slept in a cabin with twelve other girls, and now has a myriad of penpals. Strangely enough, she was me all along.

Andrea J. Love

Writing

I can't actually identify a moment when I learned how to write. I doubt there was one. What I do remember were the mechanics; painstakingly tracing bold letters through inch-thick roads of kindergarten writing paper. My crayon drove jerkily, slowly, switching gears at the straight lines of a "K" and the curves of an "S". It looked nothing at all like my mother's curled, elegant characters or my father's all-caps sketching; but knowing that I was *writing*—such an unexplained, mystifying, grown-up sort of knowledge—was thrilling.

I have a distinct memory of sitting at the kitchen table with stacks of paper in front of me, steering my pen in indecipherable loops across the page. When my mother, off the phone at last, asked what I was doing, I was offended. "I'm writing!" I proclaimed proudly, surprised that she couldn't see the clear likeness between her relaxed cursive and my enthusiastic imitations.

So I learned. I learned how to make the symbols, how to spell the words. I learned grammar and punctuation, and how to properly format a letter. Still, I never learned how to write.

The big mystery for me was always how the authors *knew* how to do it. Did the plots grow themselves in some distant land, weaving through time and space, waiting until they were fully conceived, and then migrating like birds until they found the perfect mind to settle in? Did every breathtakingly elegant turn of phrase have an incubation period where it was merely a fledgling word or two? Or were authors, *writers*, meditating in some solitary sylvan cabin like an allegorical depiction of Wisdom, simply more than human?

I hadn't learned how to *write* in fifth grade when we were given the assignment to think up a story and *illustrate* it. That was probably the most thrilling part of the whole project. Girls who had groaned at programming robots in science, who traded stickers under the desks when our teacher talked about the history of the submarine, immediately perked up. Art! They could do that. Unlike the other girls, I was more excited about writing my own story than about how, exactly, I would illustrate it; so I set to work on the next great sci-fi novel. It involved space travel, conflicting alien species, magical powers, and everybody became friends at the end. Nobody told me that sci-fi was for boys and nerds. I just wrote what I thought was exciting.

In retrospect, I learned a lot from that story. I learned how to write dialogue properly. I learned how to spell "incense". But mechanical techniques were not *writing*. My story wasn't good enough. It wasn't *Nancy Drew*. I hadn't learned how to *write*, and that was what I yearned for. Some day, I thought, maybe in middle school, maybe even high school, someone would teach me how to be brilliant, imaginative, engaging. *That* would be writing.

Years of school and learning have led to the present day, and I find myself still waiting. We have been given the "Jane Schaeffer" method. It dictates the number and placement of topic sentences, concrete data, commentary, transitions—and I find myself struggling with it. My writing comes from a love of language and elegance. It comes from an appreciation of words, ideas, emotion, and the innovative manipulation of it all.

Though methods and formulae may have their place, true writing is an organic spewing of the uncontainable self: an impulsive regurgitation of ideas through the lens of the individual, no matter how messy it may get. J.D. Salinger understood. Toni Morrison, Ken Kesey, Maya Angelou, Gregory McGuire, David Guterson, Zora Neale Hurston—all writers that conjure miracles in their spark of creativity and ability to construct worlds from words. What good are ideas if you can't express them?

Nearly everyone knows how to write, but to do so gracefully, with eloquence and depth, is a challenge infinite in both its difficulty and its reward. Unlike the four-year-old me assumed, learning was not the hard part. The difficulty, and the miracle, comes from within. The words are

fireworks—exploding to form their own accidental cascades of sparkling color and imagery. They have taken over my life, defining and extending its possibilities. And though I may be offered equations, claims that writing can be as logical as calculus, I know that writing is the ultimate challenge *because* there is no answer. Writing is glorious *because* it cannot be defined by any method, diagram, or chart. And I know too, that I am not the only one who has, or will ever desperately put pen to paper, in a fleeting attempt to record—with triumphant disarray—the glancing of light on waves, or the dance of wind: or this.

James May
Elegy for Joe Magarac

"…we emerged upon that ugly confusion of black buildings and crazy galleries and stores which always abuts on water, whether it be river, sea, canal or ditch, and we were in Pittsburg"

~Charles Dickens

But it doesn't look so bad from up here. My plane hooks east by the city. No smokestacks down there, just clean cold air. Sure, a few vaporous spires still rise above the skyline, but these aren't from blast furnaces; they're from heating units and look like the feeble descendants of whatever hulking clouds of soot Dickens must have seen when he looked down from Coal Hill. Now we're following the Ohio River to the airport, and I spot Neville Island, its acres of chemicals safely buried under the new sports complex of indoor golf courses and skating rinks. The suburbs dissolve into farms and highways. We land. I'm back in Pittsburgh.

After exiting the plane, I navigate the concourse that was state-of-the-art in the early 90's when the city was busy gentrifying itself. Meanwhile, the population was shrinking, so much so that US Airways packed up its hub, and, like me, headed south. My grandfather likes to say there are more Irish living outside Ireland than in it; now he can say the same about Pittsburghers and Pittsburgh. We haven't been cast away by potato famine or car bomb politics, though—we're simply economic exiles. And we're everywhere, always excited when we recognize another person wearing a Steelers or Penguins hat walking towards us down the streets of some other city. "Pitts*burgh*!" some guy shouted last year as I waited for the light to change at the corner of W. Gray and Montrose in Houston. He must have seen my license plate, which still has a Pitts*burgh* car dealer's name on it. I looked at him, said "Hey." He stared, then shouted "Pitts*burgh*!" again. What else could I do? I shouted, "Pitts*burgh*!" back at him. He nodded, rolled up his window and drove away.

On the way to the baggage claim there's a statue of former Steelers fullback Franco Harris lunging to complete the *Immaculate Reception*. Next to it, a statue of then General Washington looks rather unimpressed with the effort; but above them, in a font too steady and bold to carry any irony, both men are boasted as "Two Great Champions With Pittsburgh Ties." Minutes later, flanked on either side by my duffle bags, I walk out into that cold, cold air to go find my mother who's been orbiting the terminal in her car. It's snowing! Since moving to Houston four years ago, I only see Pittsburgh in December, so all this coldness seems so strange it's almost pleasant. My mother's SUV, encrusted with road-salt and slush, pulls up. I heave my bags into its hatchback, and we're off.

But I can't go home right away. My mother, whose cell phone won't leave her ear for the next fifteen minutes, needs to go back to work at her new law firm on Oliver and Smithfield, only about two blocks away from where my father works for another firm in the US Steel Building. A hulking and charmingly ugly tower built in the 1960s, the Steel Building, with its triangular perimeter, marks the city's geometry by mirroring the confluence of the Monongahela and the Allegheny, which together form the Ohio River. It's far taller than anything else in the skyline that suddenly fills the windshield as we exit the Fort Pitt Tunnel. Funny thing about the Steel Building: its exterior is covered in a coarse rust, an aesthetic faux pas of sorts, which, though done on purpose, keeps staining the surrounding buildings whenever the wind flicks the Cor-Ten-soiled rain from its walls. And so now, every few years, the city commissions someone to scrub this ghost-thin film from the Civic Arena's steel roof.

We park outside the office. Despite everything everyone says about Wallace Stevens, the perpetual example used when proving poets and offices *can* get along, I always feel out of place whenever cubicles and boardrooms are concerned. And my mother, I'm beginning to see, feels the same way. After a few of her polite hints, she offers me a five—which I want to take, but don't—and then I am off, heading towards a cup of coffee until she can finish up the day.

With my rumpled dress shirt and thin sports jacket, I'm hopelessly unprepared for 24 degrees and dropping; consequently, the Borders Bookstore next door will have to do. On my way there, I pass the stained-

glass window of Joe Magarac, one of the few Pittsburgh heroes without a Super Bowl ring. A bit of a burly lummox himself, one who could have no doubt been one hell of a linebacker, Magarac was a folk-steelworker with an IQ slightly lower than Paul Bunyan's blue ox, Babe. This comparison seems evenmore fitting in that Magarac is actually Croatian for "donkey."

But he wasn't a complete dumbass. Sometimes called the patron saint of the mills, our man was made out of steel, which allowed him to do things like squeeze molten metal through the cracks of his fingers to make railroad ties. I've also heard legends in which he would taste-test those boiling alloys like scrupulous chefs try a ladle of soup before adding just a little more salt. But the most important thing to remember about Magarac is the way in which he looked out for his fellow workers. He was constantly saving his mates from teetering Bessemers, plunging beams, and calamities of that sort. However, the mill, and his stupidity claimed our hero's life in the end. The legend goes that he flung himself into a Bessemer furnace to make the perfect mill from his metallic flesh.

This is not the first time I've stared up at that window—I've done it since I was a kid. It's a gaudy mash of sulfuric yellows and grays now dripping with pine branches. If I were to go into the lobby and ask any number of the caffeinated crowd traversing its tile floors who the man in the window is, I'm sure only a handful would know. And of those who would, most would be in their sixties like my father—Pittsburghers old enough to remember the mills, what it was like to take two shirts to work because the first one would be soot-stained by lunch.

Still, despite his obscurity, Joe Magarac's up there, slightly grim in this representation, but surely not because the folks below him have forgotten his name, for Pittsburghers like him, who are infected with an overlap of New England manners and the Midwest's humility, don't care too much about recognition, at least not enough to show it. He's at work in the window, still in his steel mill, though it's now housed in a twenty story office building. There's something absurd about this; and I worry that there's a similar absurdity to lamenting the steel mills that never did mean much to me simply because I wasn't alive when they were churning their awful, yet economically vital fumes into the air.

I'm well aware that anyone who writes about place, particularly his or her hometown, risks writing banal elegies for the good old days. The poems and stories, as they often do, can become redundant and esoteric, like Richard Hugo's work (this statement excludes, of course, "Degrees of Gray at Phillipsburg" and a handful of other poems). But still, almost every poet has his or her go-to haunts. Stevens's imagination always seems to be in Florida. Frost has his New England farms and snowy woods. Bishop walks the Nova Scotian and Brazilian coasts. And not far down the river, James Wright, amid the sweet smell of burning leaves, sees the darkening autumn weeks encroach upon Eastern Ohio like a blitzing defensive line.

Somewhere within his New England woods, Robert Frost's oven bird asked "what to make of a diminished thing?" Western Pennsylvania on almost all accounts—economy, population, environment, etc.—is a diminished thing. But this is nothing new, and I'm certainly not the first poet to write about the post-smokestack era. Judith Vollmer, Gerald Stern, and Jack Gilbert, have all written and written well on this subject. Gilbert's work in particular is admirable, mainly because it rarely laments Pittsburgh and its poisonous smog as some lost Eden. Here's a poem from Gilbert's The Great Fires:

Trying to Have Something Left Over

There was a great tenderness to the sadness
when I would go there. She knew how much
I loved my wife and that we had no future.
We were like casualties helping each other
as we waited for the end. Now I wonder
if we understood how happy those Danish
afternoons were. Most of the time we did not talk.

> Often I took care of the baby while she did
> housework. Changing him and making him laugh.
> I would say *Pittsburgh* softly each time before
> throwing him up. Whisper *Pittsburgh* with
> my mouth against the tiny ear and throw
> him higher. Pittsburgh and happiness high up.
> The only way to leave even the smallest trace.
> So that all his life her son would feel gladness
> unaccountably when anyone spoke of the ruined
> city of steel in America. Each time almost
> remembering something maybe important that got
> lost. (30)

Pittsburgh's already "ruined" in this poem, and Gilbert's not weeping over a past that was—let's face it—rather disgusting (I mean the city's, not the speaker's apparently adulterous affair—who are we to judge?). Still Pittsburgh was part of Gilbert's childhood, and thus important to him, so he's not about to let it be remembered as America's putrid armpit. By saying its name over and over again, the city becomes part of the child's past as well, but not one that's definite, hence the paradoxical uncertainty in the last few lines or so: "almost / remembering something maybe important that got lost." For the child who knows nothing of the Pittsburgh Gilbert knew, the name Pittsburgh will bring, so the speaker hopes, an unaccountable joy. Like Joe Magarac's stained-glass image refracting light over indifferent and briskly moving bodies in business suits, what Pittsburgh was and is is disconnected from what represents it to the child, in this case its name; and yet, somehow, even when planted in the child's sub-conscious memory, its name is still pregnant with the diminished past Gilbert knows but does not communicate in story or prose—instead, he couples it with a physical rise and fall.

My Pittsburgh, which serves as the backdrop for most of my writing, was diminished well before I ever burst upon the scene. Notice my tense—diminished, not diminishing. Which means the oxidized creeks, aging population, and all the other industrial ghosts were constant factors, not new ones that I had to cope with as change. And yet, that past, whether it was greater or not, is still present in the landscape, accents, and structures. But like all pasts, it's at risk of being forgotten.

Not all of my poems are set in Western Pennsylvania, though; Krakow, the Mediterranean, New Hampshire, Wordsworth's Lake District all make cameos, but there is a Pittsburghness to all of them. Diminishment, not a celebration nor a lamentation of it, but rather recognition of its presence, is a theme that continually crops up in my poems. This is, for the most part, sub-consciously on purpose, but I cannot deny my Romantic ideals, which bring with them a need for place, to be more specific: the childhood place.

* * *

In his essay "Happiness" Czeslaw Milosz writes this about his Wordsworthian childhood:

> I lived without yesterday or tomorrow, in the eternal present. This is, precisely, the definition of happiness. I ask myself whether I mythologize that period of my life. We all build myths when speaking of the past, for a faithful reconstruction of fleeting moments is impossible. The question, however remains: Why do some people speak of their childhoods as happy, others, as miserable? The extreme vividness and intensity of my experience forces me to believe in its authenticity. It was, I do not hesitate to say, an experience of enchantment with earth as a Paradise. (21)

Borders Bookstore, within earshot of Mr. Magarac's stained-glass afterlife. It will be another few hours before my mother is through with her clients, and this Milosz passage, a favorite of mine, makes me think of another Pittsburgh—not the city that I'm in, but the wooded areas around my own home. A creek (pronounced *crick* in this half of the state) surrounded by a modest forest of poplars runs behind our house. I'd spend hours beside that creek, sometimes in it. These moments were, as Milosz would have them, enchanting, all in all, and often frightening. Deer, the occasional vexed turkey, groundhogs, boulders the size of ogres, slimy things on the underside of rocks, skunk cabbage, skunks, raccoons, turtles, toads, bats easily fooled by lofted baseballs were all a part of this. But so was that orange film on the basin of the creek, as were the rusting drums found in

pockets of dreck; sort of like oasises in reverse, these impromptu dumping grounds held everything from refrigerators to garbage bags stuffed with empty bottles of I. C. Light fresh from last weekend's high school bash. When I looked at those orange stains, I didn't think of anything, just stared at them as if in a trance, and probably would have called them beautiful if I knew that word.

Coming back to the banks of some pristine childhood river is one thing; it's quite another to revisit the childhood coal tailings. They're everywhere in Pennsylvania, often garnished with broken whisky and beer bottles—an appropriate décor, since such heavy drinking is a result, directly or indirectly, of the industry.

Alas, the poet can't choose where his or her Tintern Abbey is, and to leave what Pablo Neruda would call "the impurity of the human condition" out of the landscape when it's so clearly there, would not only be untruthful, it would be a betrayal to both the place and the poet. Any poet whose seed-time was spent in a Pittsburgh-like place has to recognize this. And when he or she does look back, it most likely will be with disgust, but not one that excludes solace and relief. Here's Gerald Stern making just such a gesture:

When I Have Reached the Point of Suffocation

When I have reached the point of suffocation,
then I go back to the railroad ties

and the mound of refuse.
Then I can have sorrow and repentance,

I can relax in the broken glass
and the old pile of chair legs;

I am brought back to my senses
and soothed a little.

It is really the only place I can go
for relief.

The streets, the houses, the institutions,
and the voices that occupy them,

are too hard and ugly
for any happiness

and the big woods outside
too full of its own death—

I go to the stone wall,
and the dirty ashes

and the old shoes
and the daisies.

It takes years to learn how to look at the destruction
of beautiful things;

to learn how to leave the place
of oppression;

and how to make your own regeneration
out of nothing. (25)

I'm still not home yet. It's only early afternoon as I'm reading this in the But if we go by the legend, Joe Magarac does not regenerate. Even if we give him the benefit of the doubt, and say that perfect mill was built from his remains, I imagine it's been closed by now; and if not in complete disarray, that unparalleled steel's been torn down, scrapped, and supplanted by some three-acre movie theater along the Allegheny River. Stern's poem is about returning, not living in these places, not wholly giving yourself over to them as Magarac and many of his faithful colleagues did.

Stern's a bit tricky here too. He gives the problem, i.e. "the point of suffocation" then reveals the solution, telling us that he goes "back to the railroad ties" for it. But he doesn't quite give us the reason why this works, and even slightly ducks our questions by writing that "It takes years to learn how to look at the destruction / of beautiful things,"

which suggests—perhaps with a condescending smirk—that this sort of knowledge is acquired by age and age alone. I'm only twenty-six, though, and think I should be able to know exactly what he's writing about. Maybe Milosz will tell me.

At the end of "Happiness" Milosz writes this about returning to his childhood home in Lithuania after years of exile:

> The theme of homeland, the whole nostalgic rhetoric of patria fed by literature since Odysseus journeyed to Ithaca, has been weakened if not forgotten. Returning to my river valley, I carried with me my heritage of these venerable clichés, already grown somewhat pale, and I was rather impervious to their sentimental appeal. Then something happened—and I must recognize the myth of Ithaca stems from profound layers of human sensibility. I was looking at a meadow. Suddenly the realization came that during my years of wandering I had searched in vain for such a combination of leaves and flowers as was here and that I have been always yearning to return. Or, to be precise, I understood this after a huge wave of emotion had overwhelmed me, and the only name I can give it now would be—bliss. (25-26)

I still might not be far enough removed from Pittsburgh to feel exactly what he is writing about. Plus, bliss is a decidedly warm weather emotion: like a seventy degree day, not impossible to have in a Pittsburgh December, but unlikely nonetheless.

I'm not back yet. The fluorescent lights in the bookstore have taken over from the sun, and down the street, Magarac's now lit from the lobby lights within. I think of the pines and birches in my old snow-covered yard, the bars we'll pass on the way there, where grown men wear football jerseys and drink harder than their fathers taught them. I will look at that yard, maybe hoping for the feeling Milosz describes—maybe not because the right "combination of leaves and flowers" but because of the rust and snow and branches I'll see. It will be cold, so I won't wait long. There will be many more times to return.

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Jennifer Sefa-Boakye

On the Fact of the Matter

They say reading is fundamental, but don't you find it interesting how unlikely it is for someone to actually remember the first book they read as a child? It saddens me that for so long this milestone has been overshadowed and deemed irrelevant by the likes of The First Word and The First Day of School, and I only wish we would start to give The First Book its due recognition. I for one can remember that a large print, hardcover edition of Yuri Olesha's *The Three Fat Men* was my induction into the wonderful world of reading.

I know what you're thinking: "How on earth can she remember that?" Well, it boggles my mind too, but I can confidently say this because I have proof. Written in red crayon at the bottom of the book's title page are the words, "My first book. Started: May 15th 1993 Stopped: July 23rd 1993". Initially, I struggled to fully believe how my five year old self had been able to complete the book, and then had an inkling of the need for posterity, but I wrote it so it must be true right? Why I picked this particular book, all one hundred and seventy six pages of it, is still a mystery to me though. Perhaps it belonged to my older brother, whose nine year old sensibilities at the time would not have favored the Russian fairy tale about a circus troupe's revolution against the tyranny of the eponymous trio, and did not mind passing it on to me. Our relationship over the years has continued on this parasitic bent and after devouring all his unwanted books I guess I'm to blame for him being such a horrible speller.

Have I managed to convince you yet? You can seek verification from my mother but of course, she is no help because according to her, my congratulatory childhood scribbling is a lie. Don't be so quick to agree with her though. My mother's story is even more incredulous than mine.

Through the years no major family gathering is complete without my mother telling everyone how I taught myself to read at the age of twenty-six months. No, you didn't mishear me; my mother believes I read my first book when I was a little over two years old! We have argued over this year after year but I, being a mere tot at the time and incapable of remembering exactly what happened, am forced to go along with her version of events in public. Why do it, you ask. Why allow her to sully my good name in front of Grandma Grace and Uncle Tony each and every time? I don't know. Maybe it has something to do with the 5th commandment which I think roughly translated should actually mean, "Honor thy mother and father and ye shall inherit a loss of freedom and the right to free speech." I am bound to believe her every word.

Although there is no actual physical evidence that corroborates my mother's story, it has been recounted so many times that it has become a staple at reunions and Christmas parties—no one is satisfied until they have heard it. "Has Auntie Helena told that story about you yet?" my little cousins ask as they race past me down the hallway. I shake my head and only hope that she will forget it this one time. This is highly unlikely as my mother belongs to that peculiar breed of people who delight in telling the same stories over and over regardless of veracity or audience. I should know, as I have heard it at least ten times a year for the last thirteen years of my life. Naturally, newcomers who have never heard this story take her tale with a grain of salt. These naysayers are the current girlfriends, boyfriends, fiancées and husbands of various members of my extended family, and I do not fault them for not believing it. My mother knows this, and once she notices the seeds of doubt reflected in their shifting glances and polite smiles, she goes in for the kill. Her weapon of choice? My baby book

The pink leather bound diary chronicles the major milestones in my life from the moment I was born until my first day of kindergarten. Technically, by the time one is five the term baby no longer applies, but I guess my status change did not affect my mother's fascination with the minutiae of my life post-babyhood. The pages are weak, dog-eared and stuffed to capacity with photos, prescriptions, and assorted knickknacks related to my infancy, but my mother knows exactly where to look. She has done this many times before.

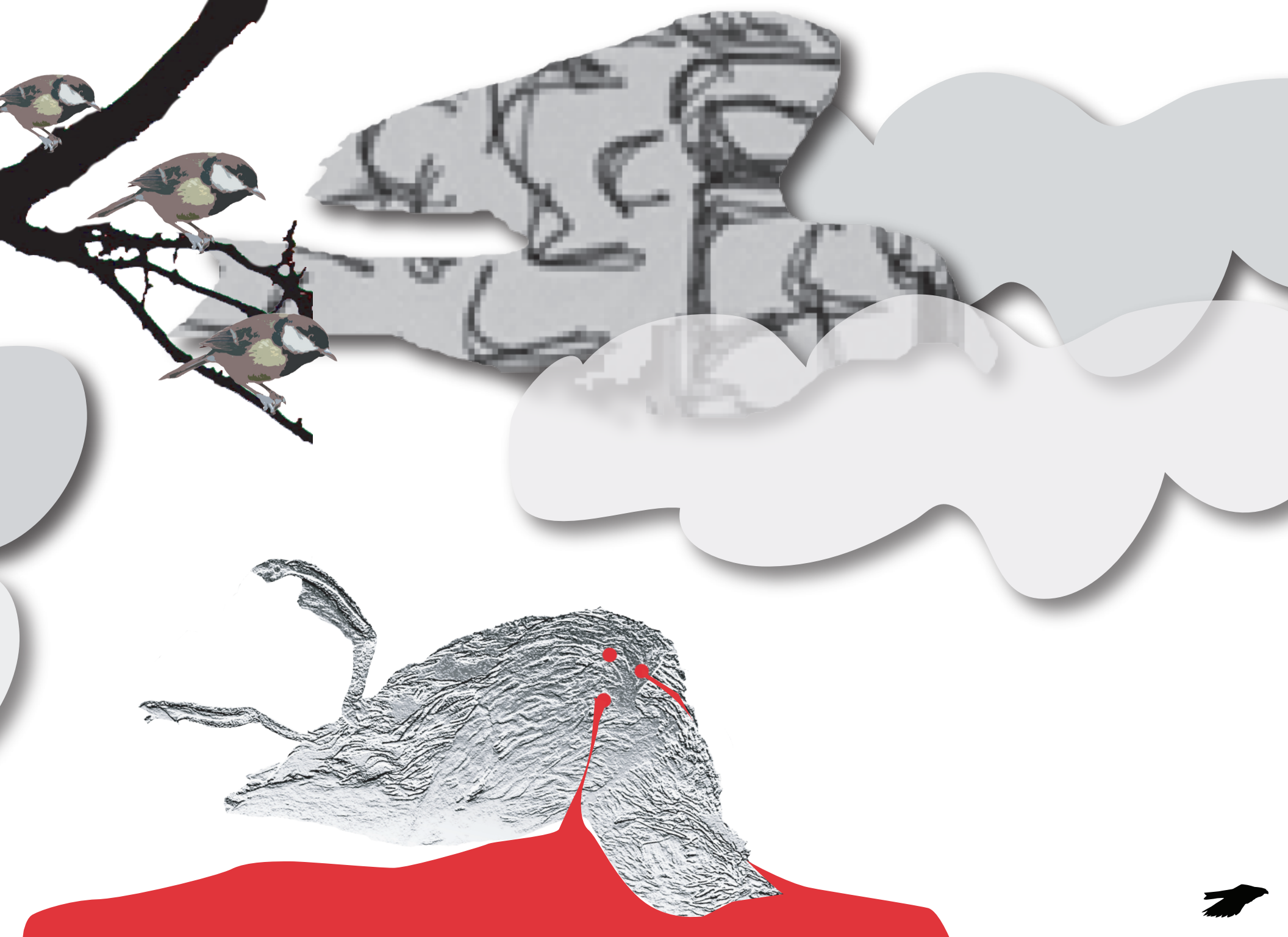
The picture she eventually presents to her skeptical audience is

a simple one. In it, I am sitting at the kitchen table of my parents' first apartment with my bare feet dangling high above the linoleum floor. My head is propped up on the table by a tiny fist and I am staring intently into an open book. The Polaroid print has the words *"Jennifer reading in the kitchen, August 1990"* under it and this is all the evidence she presents to support her story. To the untrained eye, untrained here meaning not my mother's, this is simply a picture of me staring into a book. For all we know the pages could be filled with nothing but brightly colored flowers and rainbows, but I dare not contradict her in public because in my mother's eyes, this picture represents the twenty years of education she and my father were able to provide my brother and I with. Trips to the library were a weekly pastime and every Christmas my stocking was sure to be stuffed with the latest installment of the Baby-Sitters Club book series. Birthdays brought a shopping spree at the bookstore where I was free to roam the aisles in wide-eyed wonder, giddy with excitement at the sheer volume of books surrounding me.

My love for writing was borne out of my love for reading, and as a fledgling writer I am very grateful for their role in my cultivating a love for prose and also, for making sure I never lost it as I grew older. How could I when day in and day out I was inundated with the visions of grandeur my mother for me. I am not exactly trailblazing a path on the search for the cure to cancer but things seem to have worked out pretty well.

Sometime during an incarnation of my mother's story the lines between fact and fiction blurred and were lost forever. I may very well have been some sort of wunderkind who was able to to read at the third grade level by the time she was potty trained or perhaps I was just a normal kid like most of you who learned to read with Dick and Jane—who knows? Ultimately reality is a question of perspective; my mother has hers and I have mine. It is up to you what you choose to believe.

One - Act Play



Louisa Hill

Child's Pose

List of Characters

MARIA: A yoga teacher.

WENDY: MARIA's daughter.

MAMA: MARIA's mother.

DAISY: MARIA's sister.

Scene

A fluid, flexible space: at times outdoors, a yoga class, and a childhood home.

Time

The past and the present.

SETTING: A fluid, flexible space: at times a field, a yoga class, and a childhood home.

AT RISE: WENDY stands downstage center, dressed in a cross country uniform. MARIA stretches on a yoga mat in the background.

WENDY and MARIA
(to the audience, in unison)
In my memory, I relive it with devastating precision.

WENDY
(to the audience)

There I am, lapping past the third k, flying through the course. My legs wobble in the beginning, but I dig deep and push through. Four people left in front of me. I watch my legs carry me up the hill. Three left. They always say passing people on the way uphill is the best because it's demoralizing. You gotta leave a reserve of energy just for this. Your crushing power. Now two people left. I crest the hill, staying with the second runner. She gets ahead, then I get ahead. I break away, sprinting. I see the end in sight, just at the bottom. I sprint, grasping for the last person ahead. I almost touch this faceless entity, this thing.

My legs outstretched, soaring down the hill, I land, and maybe it's a root, maybe a rock, but I land wrong, I lose my balance, my ankle gives out, my legs get all wrapped up in each other, and that's it.

My torso collides with the ground, knocking the wind out of me. Carries me down the hill. Within meters I see the finish line, but I can't even crawl there. I'm paralyzed. Not by pain, not yet that is, but by the sense of sheer powerlessness. Our trainer has just enough time to drag me off the course before the flood of people erupts behind me. And I'm through.

(WENDY staggers past MARIA, limping severely.)

MARIA
I'm sorry, honey.

WENDY
(angrily)
I don't want to talk about it!

(WENDY exits offstage, in obvious pain. MARIA stretches patiently on her mat.)

MARIA
People come to yoga for all reasons. Some seek a connection, some want an escape. I came to yoga because I needed an explanation. I had to get deep in touch with these bones that carried me through the desert.

(WENDY enters, more calmly.)

MARIA
Hi sweetheart. Do you want some miso soup?

WENDY
I'm not hungry, Mom.

MARIA
It's a healing soup.

WENDY
Soup is soup. It's not gonna fix me.

MARIA
I know what it's like to need to run away from home.

WENDY
That's not what I meant. I'm free when I'm running.

MARIA
To get better, you have to figure out why you have to keep doing it.

WENDY
I run because I run. That's it.

MARIA
But you got so hurt.

WENDY
You weren't even there!

MARIA
Just try a few poses?

(MARIA motions to an unoccupied yoga mat. WENDY silently curses the world. She kicks off her shoes, and steps on the mat, rolling her eyes.)

MARIA
First, before you begin each yoga practice, you set your intention. This intention can be focusing on a word, a thought, a feeling, a person—something to reflect on during your practice to clear your mind and remind yourself why you are on the mat today. My intention is to show you how I let you down and why I have to betray you again.

WENDY
Mom, you're being ridiculous.

MARIA
Before this intention can be realized, you must know where you came from and what has happened along the way.

WENDY
Fine.

MARIA

Good. Welcome. Close your eyes. Let's connect with the breath.

(demonstrating the poses as she instructs)

Stretch your legs back.

WENDY

(a low uncomfortable moan)

Ohhhwwww.

MARIA

Does it hurt?

WENDY

That's what oww means!

MARIA

The good hurt or the bad hurt?

WENDY

Is there a difference?

MARIA

Good hurt like you're connecting with something deep or bad hurt like something's not right.

WENDY

The kind where my body's saying, what the hell are you doing to me!

MARIA

Let's go with it. We'll start with Sun Salutation, the first series of poses. It'll warm up you up for the more intense ones.

(As MARIA demonstrates the following poses, WENDY follows half-heartedly. MARIA looks over and smiles, encouraging WENDY. WENDY rolls her eyes.)

MARIA

First, mountain pose.

Bend your knees, lift your arms, look at your hands. Chair or Fierce pose. I prefer "fierce."

Standing Forward Bend. Inhale to look up and lengthen your spine. As you exhale, step or jump back into four-limbed staff.

Upward Facing Dog.

Downward Facing dog. Widen your stance more. Good.

As you inhale, step your right foot between your hands and come like this. Warrior. It reminds me of who I was when I was younger.

(MAMA walks in.)

MAMA

(with disgust)

What the hell are you doing?

(MARIA starts to lose her balance. She corrects herself.)

MARIA

(to WENDY)

We store our history in our bodies. As you stretch, memories and emotions will flood you. Connect with them, but then move on.

MAMA

(angrily)

I said, what are you doing? What's wrong with you?

MARIA

Warrior pose, Mama.

MAMA

You're crazy.

MARIA
(to WENDY)
Steady the pose and breathe through the intensity.

MAMA
Your father's on his way.

MARIA
Okay.

MAMA
The table needs to be set.

MARIA
I'll be there in a minute.

MAMA
(smirking)
He called to tell me he got really lucky this time. Shot right into a nest. Doves.

(MARIA loses her balance completely.)

MARIA
I'm a vegetarian.

MAMA
Not when your father spends his afternoons hunting, you aren't.

MARIA
I'm not eating that.

MAMA
You will not deny your father the pleasure of providing for his family.

MARIA
It's against my belief in ahimsa.

MAMA
What the hell are you talking about?

MARIA
It means no killing or violence.

MAMA
Uh huh.

MARIA
I'm trying to achieve spiritual bliss and contentment.

MAMA
Not in my house you're not. In my house you're going to go downstairs, set the table, hug your father, and eat what he has brought you.

MARIA
Well then I'll go somewhere else.
(to audience)
How to be a vegetarian in my mother's house. Pull out a withered head of iceberg lettuce from the refrigerator. Chop it. Drown it in Thousand Island dressing. Eat. Repeat until nauseous. When your mother puts the breast of the baby dove on your plate, don't gag. Don't even look at it. Make friends with the macrobiotic hippie next door. She'll fix you something nice. She knows you're sad.

(MARIA leaves. DAISY comes up to MAMA with a tray of cookies.)

DAISY
Mama, look, I made some gingersnaps!

MAMA
Where's your sister?

DAISY
That crazy lady's house.

MAMA
What's she doing there?

DAISY
I don't know. She goes over there a lot. Learns about food and stuff.

MAMA
Nothing wrong with the food we have here.

DAISY
I know, Mama. Do you want to try a cookie?

MAMA
Trying to make us feel bad.

DAISY
I don't know what's wrong with her.

(MARIA enters.)

MAMA
Where were you?

MARIA
Just across the street.

MAMA
Don't bother her anymore.

MARIA
She likes me.

MAMA
Why would she like you?

MARIA
She showed me a twist thing. You wanna see?

MAMA
Don't do that here! The neighbors could see.

MARIA
She says it helps with emotional balance.

DAISY
Means she thinks you're crazy!

MAMA
Get on, finish sweeping before your father gets home. You, open the can of corned beef.

MARIA
I'm making some chickpeas.

DAISY
Don't upset Mama.

MAMA
I'm not going to have you stink up the kitchen with that Indian crap.

MARIA
Then I'll do it somewhere else.

MAMA
You will not leave this house!

DAISY

Don't yell at her, Mama. She didn't mean it. Why don't we all just have a cookie.

MAMA

Apologize to me if you didn't mean it.

MARIA

No.

(to WENDY)

So I left as soon as I could, poor as anything, but I didn't care. At least I could afford brown rice. Brown rice is the center of the macrobiotic scale. You eat it to be balanced. All my life I wanted some sense of normalcy.

(shouting to MAMA and DAISY)

I hate you!

(to WENDY)

Let me show you how to make brown rice. First, put the rice in your pot. Fill it with water. Stir the rice around with your hands until the water is cloudy. Do this thoughtfully, with intention. Empty the cloudy water and refill the pot with fresh water, stirring again until the cloudiness rises. Continue this process until the water is clear.

Later, when you are first born, and I give you your first bath, I remember this. For this pose, you gently put your daughter in the sink with warm water. You rub her hair. She smiles and laughs. But I'm getting the poses out of order.

Now you wait for the water to boil. Brown rice requires patience, so it helps if you have a story to tell. Right now I suffer the severing of my roots and search for a new family. When I meet your father, he tells me I am young with very old eyes. We are opposites, yin and yang, which means that we should be very balanced.

A quick guide to yin and yang food: All foods are either yin or yang and their qualities will affect how you think, feel, and act. Yang is fast, heavy, and hot, like red meat. Like my mother. Yin is an energy that is slow, light, and cold, like sugar. And my sister. A balance of these two

MARIA (Cont'd.)

forces is necessary for the health and harmony of body and mind. That's why when you have corned beef hash, you crave your sister's chocolate chip cookies.

But somehow it doesn't work the same way when it's people and not food. When you have one who gathers and holds on, while the other separates and diffuses; one whose tendency is darkness and coldness, while the other is of lightness and warmth, you feel anything but balanced. It's true, the greater polarity means the greater attraction. But attraction doesn't mean love. And we part. But it's not the end of my practice. No, no. Instead, I prepare for a new practice: Cradle the baby pose.

DAISY

Are you kidding?

MARIA

My sister is the first to find out. She's married to some therapist by this time. They have a son. When I tell her, she says,

DAISY

I know a place where they can...you know.

MARIA

I'm going to keep it.

DAISY

You can't be serious.

MARIA

I am.

DAISY

Actually Charles and I were thinking of having another. We can adopt the child when it comes. Charlie's always wanted to have a brother!

MARIA
I can take care of my own child!

DAISY
It's an option. I just know that times are rough for you.

MARIA
Times are fine. I'm going to have a family.

MAMA
Well I think your sister offered a great solution. She's a real saint.

MARIA
I'm not going to give my child up!

MAMA
How do you think you're going to raise a child?

MARIA
With love.

MAMA
You're an idiot.

DAISY
Mama, we can just tell everyone that he was off at war.

MARIA
I'm not going to lie.

MAMA
Oh now you care about being a good person. Where were those morals 3 months ago?

DAISY
He always said that
if he had a brother
he would always have
a friend at home!
I hope it's a boy!

MAMA
He always said that
something like this
would happen to you.
And look what we have--
Whore!

MARIA
(angrily interrupting both of them)
Stop it!

(pause, to WENDY)
Breathe through the intensity. Recognize the thoughts and feelings that arise, but don't be consumed by them. Even after 20 years, they still have me by the throat.

WENDY
Mom, it's ridiculous. You had other people in your life. Why didn't you just write them off?

MARIA
Don't say that. They were family.

WENDY
Family is such a superficial concept!

MARIA
You are my family. And when you are born I love you.

WENDY
Well, besides that. We like each other because we're decent people. But why bother with people just because you have similar genetic makeup?

MARIA
Family represents a common history and spirit that connects us together

MARIA (Cont'd.)
for reasons we don't understand. To be free, we must connect with our roots.

WENDY
No, the concept of family is a patriarchal social construction. To be free we must transcend our perceived need for it.

MARIA
You can't be so cynical about what you don't know. Family is destiny. Whether good or bad, they provide the tools with which to know ourselves.

WENDY
Mom, I've never seen my grandparents—-how are they supposed to teach me to know myself?

MARIA
You saw them when you were little.

WENDY
I did?

MARIA
I need to sit down. These memories are too much.

WENDY
We're just beginning, Mom! I want to keep moving!

MARIA
Then you lead.

WENDY
Me lead? Yeah right. When I try to balance I wobble. It's pathetic. When

WENDY (Cont'd.)
I was younger my mom always tried to get me to do yoga. We used to do this tree pose.

MARIA
You remember that?

WENDY
Yeah. You always said,

MARIA
(as mother to a young child)
Sweetheart, let's do your yoga.

WENDY
I was probably three.

MARIA
And you remember it?

WENDY
Of course. I was a cute kid.
(as young child)
Look Mommy, I'm a tree!

MARIA
(as mother to a young child)
Wow, very nice.

WENDY
Your turn, Mommy!

MARIA
How's that?

WENDY

Look, Mommy, we're a forest.

MARIA

Watch out, I hope someone doesn't chop us down!

WENDY

That's why we should recycle. Because there's a mommy and a baby tree out in the forest and people just want to come and chop it down and make paper.

MARIA

That's a very good point, sweetheart.

(as adult)

We can stop, you know.

WENDY

(as teenager)

Mom, we just got started. It's starting to come back to me. From the tree position, we can move into Half Lotus Chair Pose. You have to be really steady to do this transition.

When I was little we used to transition a lot. We were always moving.

MARIA

(as mother to child)

Quickly, sweetheart, we have to leave!

WENDY

(as child)

Where are we going this time?

MARIA

I move around a lot. New city. New job. I remind myself that suffering comes from desire. To end suffering, you must end desire. But sometimes I just want food for the table.

MARIA (Cont'd.)

I frantically stir the rice. They say that this brown burnt part at the bottom is very yang. But children are already yang. What I mean to tell you is that I don't have food to feed you. Please forgive me for what I have to do:

The kneeling pose.

(MARIA kneels in front of MAMA.)

MAMA

You're coming to beg at my doorstep?

MARIA

Please, Mama. Can I stay with you for just a few weeks? I need to find a job.

MAMA

So much for your independent attitude! I thought you could do anything.

MARIA

Please, Mama.

WENDY

(as teenager)

Yes, this part I remember.

(as child)

Standing backbend: the big-eyes-where-are-we?-Who-are-they?-Woo!-Everything-is-so-tall-and-I'm-so-small pose.

MAMA

What's wrong with your child?

MARIA

She's doing yoga, Mama.

MAMA
Kids need to be doing something else. It's not healthy. Well, stand up.

MARIA
Thank you for taking us in, Mama.

MAMA
We were wondering when we'd get to meet her. Give your grandmother a hug.

(WENDY hugs MAMA.)

MARIA
We'll just be here a few weeks.

MAMA
While you're here, you will obey our rules.

MARIA
Yes, Mama.

MAMA
You will find a job. Your daughter will stay here.

MARIA
I don't expect you to take care of her.

MAMA
Of course you do. Now let's clean up before your father gets home. That child needs some meat.

WENDY
Grandma and Grandpa have a cat. I like to play with it. Cat pose. Meow!

(WENDY does cat pose. MARIA exits.)

MAMA
(to WENDY)
What are you doing on the floor?

WENDY
I'm a cat! Meow!

MAMA
Get up; it's dirty.

WENDY
Cats don't care. Meow!

MAMA
Pretty pathetic looking cat if I've seen one.

WENDY
Nuh uh!

MAMA
You think that's how a cat moves?

WENDY
Meow!

MAMA
I'll show you a cat.

(MAMA does the pas de chat, a ballet step.)

MAMA
Pas de chat. Cat's step.

(WENDY tries to imitate MAMA.)

MAMA

No, that's not it.

Leap from a plié. Right leg to retiré. Left leg to retiré. Land on the right leg with the left leg still in retiré; then bring it down, landing in another plié.

(to the audience)

All it takes is a plié and I turn into a teenager again. The dance of the Cygnets from Swan Lake. Sixteen pas de chat. There are four of us. We interlace our arms like this.

(DAISY, MAMA, MARIA, and WENDY interlace their arms. The music starts. They perform a few pas de chat.)

MAMA

I always get so nervous, looking out to the audience when I know he's watching.

(She waves, with love. She blows a kiss. They perform a few more pas de chat.)

MAMA

The others were just jealous.

(DAISY, MARIA, and WENDY stop, break the chain. MAMA steps in front of them.)

MAMA

And I was there, just dancing for him. His prima donna.

(MAMA dances.)

MAMA

Then my leotards stopped fitting.

(MAMA stops dancing. MARIA and DAISY turn into children and grab MAMA's legs.)

MAMA

And it was the end of the dance.

(pause, then to WENDY)

Get up off the floor. Maria, do something about your daughter!

MARIA

Okay, okay!

(MARIA reaches out to guide WENDY.)

MARIA

Putting your daughter in the bath pose. Mama and I are putting you in the bath; you're still really small.

MAMA

She's filthy!

MARIA

Let's take off your shirt.

WENDY

No!

MAMA

Do what your mother tells you.

MARIA

Come on sweetheart. You have to get all nice and clean. Bath time.

WENDY

I don't want to!

MARIA
Don't you want to play in the water?

MAMA
This is what your father was talking about. She doesn't have any sense of respect.

MARIA
We finally get you into the bath. You hold yourself there and say—-

WENDY
Oww!

MARIA
What's wrong?

WENDY
It hurts.

MARIA
Mama, what's that mean?

MAMA
(laughing)
Oh, you and your sister did the same when you were little.

MARIA
(to audience)
And what do I know? I'm figuring this out every day. Time passes like the moon.

WENDY
(as teenager)
Half-moon pose. But what does it mean, mom?

MARIA
It's the weekend and Mama and I are getting ready to go on our walk. I turn the TV on for you—watching television is a new treat for you—but you cling to me and say,

WENDY
(as child)
Mommy, stay here.

MARIA
Don't you want to watch a cartoon?

WENDY
No! Don't go.

MARIA
Sweetie we'll be right back, we're just going on our walk. Go eat your pancakes with Grandpa. They're getting cold. But you start shrieking--

(WENDY starts shrieking.)

MARIA
—and I say sweetheart stop! What's wrong? And you just keep crying and I say, Mama, go on ahead without me and Mama says,

MAMA
You spoil your daughter, letting her control you like that.

MARIA
I can't leave a crying child.

MAMA
You need to show that child some discipline.

MARIA
It breaks my heart to leave you like that, but I want to do what's best for

MARIA (Cont'd.)
you. They always tell you to leave the baby crying in the crib and I do, but I always end up sitting outside your room, crying with you.

Everyone tells me I don't stand up for myself and so I need to stand my ground, especially in front of Mama. I want to show her that I can be a strong mother, too. On our walk I still must have a worried look on my face because Mama says something about how you probably just saw it in a movie or something.

MAMA
Kids are sponges. They hear something somewhere and then next thing they're convinced they're princesses or aliens or something. If I believed everything you girls had told me, then I'd've been real crazy.

MARIA
I nod. But then a few days later while I get you ready for bed I notice all of these little bruises. I say, did you fall, sweetheart?

WENDY
(as child)
It's a secret.

MARIA
I won't tell anyone.

WENDY
Come on, mom, I want to play. Can't catch me!

MARIA
Stay still a second, hold on, don't run off now.

WENDY
No mom, no mom.

MARIA
Tell me.

WENDY
Grandpa's mean.

MARIA
When did it happen?

WENDY
I don't know.

MARIA
What do you remember?

WENDY
I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. Watching the cartoons.

MARIA
When Mama and I went on our walks.

WENDY
(as teenager)
Okay mom, I think it's hurting in the bad way now.

MARIA
Then rest. Child's pose. Kneel on the floor. Touch your toes together and sit on your heels. Then separate your knees wide.

Exhale and lay your torso down between your thighs. Child's pose is a resting, restorative pose.

It's called "child's pose" because this pose comes naturally to children. When I try to figure out how to escape, you retreat to this position.

But for me, it's back to Warrior. I focus my heart center and lunge to the battlefield.

MAMA
What are you trying to say?

MARIA
Daddy hurt her.

MAMA
How dare you!

MARIA
Mama, she told me.

MAMA
After everything we've done for you, you dare to disrespect your father in such an insolent way!

MARIA
I trust my daughter.

MAMA
Children live in their imagination and you're an idiot to take her seriously. She just told you that so you'd pay attention to her.

MARIA
She couldn't have made that up. Children are too innocent.

MAMA
You're at work all day—-how do you know? Let me talk to her.
(to WENDY)
Darling, want to go on a walk with your grandmother?

MARIA
No—

WENDY
(as child)
It's okay, Mommy, I'll be safe crossing the street.

(MAMA walks WENDY out.)

MARIA
The holding your breath for a hundred years while the darkness envelopes you pose.

(MAMA and WENDY return.)

MAMA
Your daughter has something she wants to tell you.

MARIA
What?

WENDY
Mommy, I made it up.

MARIA
(to MAMA)
What did you do to her?

WENDY
I just wanted attention.

MAMA
She probably heard it somewhere. Kids say the funniest things. They even made a television show out of it.

WENDY
I made a mistake.

MAMA
You just wanted your mommy's attention, right?

WENDY
Yes. I'm sorry, Mommy.

MARIA
I'm sorry for not being there for you.

MAMA
We expect an apology as well. You've put us through a lot of stress today.

(MAMA leaves.)

MARIA
And then when she leaves, you come up to me and put your face really close to mine, cupping your hands around our faces so we're protected in a little dome. You say,

WENDY
(as child)
Mommy, it was really grandpa.
(as teenager)
Did I really?

MARIA
Yes. Just like that.

WENDY
Oh God. It was true?

MARIA
Take a deep breath. Breathe through it. Go back to child's pose and breathe.

WENDY
(to the audience)
Moments like this when my head's all crazy and I can't see straight, that's the last time I wanna lie down or sit still. When the shit hits, I put on my shoes, pack some goo, and pump the road. I'd be out there for hours on a day like this. Running so fast my thoughts can't even stay in my head, falling out with my sweat. I leave a trail of them behind me, in case anyone ever wants to know where I've been. Yeah, right, someone wants to know.

Way out here, I'm all on my own. You pass the occasional person, but you don't gotta flinch or act polite, no, no, you've got a carte blanche to speed by. Only slowing down for a second to slurp some goo-- straight glycowhatever, liquid energy, keeps me fueled for the long haul.

WENDY
But whenever I'm ripping open the pack of goo with my teeth, I hear my mom's voice. She's all like,

MARIA
(running in place next to WENDY, holding a pot of rice)
What is that poison!

WENDY
Mom, what are you doing out here?

MARIA
Sit down, have some rice.

WENDY
I'm on mile 14, mom!

MARIA
There's no life force in... gooooo.

WENDY
No one's ever gonna say I don't have a life force running 19s like this.

MARIA
That stuff is way too yin for you. You're all hyper, off balance.

WENDY
I'm balanced when I'm running.

MARIA
Come home. You need to rest. You'll hurt yourself.

WENDY
I'll hurt myself more on the big day if I'm not prepared.

MARIA
You're too young to do a marathon. Wait 'til you're older.

WENDY
No time like the present.

MARIA
It's too hard on your body. It'll be irreversible damage.

WENDY
It's off-season and I gotta stay in shape somehow. Next season I don't care what anyone says, I'm owning that stupid bitch!

MARIA
Don't say that. It's not kind.

WENDY
I don't want to be kind. I want to tear her apart.

MARIA
How about some yoga? It's about individual competition, not trying to

MARIA (Cont'd.)
hurt others.

WENDY
Where's the fun in that?
(to the audience, starting to do runner's pose)
Later, when my bones don't move like they used to, I always think about training for another one. Somehow I can't work up the nerve. I don't know if I'm cured of my need to run or if it's because after suffering brutal, bitter defeat, I don't have the courage to put myself out there again.

MARIA
(doing runner's pose)
Runner's pose bring back memories?

WENDY
Fuck, mom. I had so much potential.

MARIA
You'll get better.

WENDY
It'll never be the same. I'm messed up.

MARIA
It was my fault.

WENDY
You think you could have prevented it?

MARIA
I could have done something better about it.

Instead, this is what I do:

I pick up the phone in the bedroom. I'm afraid they'll walk in and find me, but I can hear them laughing in the other room, having already forgotten

MARIA (Cont'd.)
the crisis that stares me in the eyes.

The dialing on a rotary phone when you're trembling pose. This pose requires extreme focus and precision.

I call my friend, Sarah. She says to get out of the house, go to a neighbor's house, go to a payphone, just get out, call the police.

I pick up the phone again and think about calling the police. Maybe it's because of the inherent trembling of the pose, but I end up dialing my sister's number.

DAISY
Hello?

MARIA
The call your sister and tell her Daddy got your daughter like he got you both pose.

DAISY
I feel hot acid rising in my stomach. Later, when my stomach is consumed by gastritis, I remember this moment. I say, hold on, wait. But she keeps talking.

MARIA
I know I should call the police, but I'm scared. What'll happen?

DAISY
You can't call the police.

MARIA
Why not?

DAISY
They'll lose everything.

MARIA
And I haven't?

DAISY
I know they're not perfect, but this is all they have. They live for their social circle.

MARIA
And what am I supposed to do? Just ignore this so that their lives can continue?

DAISY
They're our family.

WENDY
(a side comment to the audience)
There you go—-"family," i.e., bullshit.

DAISY
Things like this happen in the best of families. We can figure it out.

MARIA
There's nothing to figure out!

DAISY
He's an old man. He was in the war.

MARIA
Could I borrow $300?

DAISY
For what?

MARIA
I need to rent a car. I'm driving to Sarah's.

DAISY
That's a day's drive.

MARIA
I need to get out.

DAISY
Go back and think it over, get some sleep. You're over-reacting! Oh, Charles just got in. I'll call you back.

MARIA
Wait—-

DAISY
I talk to Charles. Of course he's really upset when I tell him what she had said. Charles had a really hard childhood. He tells me, you know your father's a good man; he didn't do anything. Ever since Michael left her, you know that's she's turned into a man-hating bitch. She brainwashed that little kid. Besides, she could come over and tell Charlie everything.

MARIA
Charlie's my nephew.

DAISY
Not that you ever acknowledge him.

MARIA
I'm sorry that I didn't send him a present for his birthday!

DAISY
These events are important to children.

MARIA
Don't you think I had other things on my mind?

DAISY
Always about her. And that's what Charles says. He says, you know how she is what that daughter; she lets her run around, no control. Kids have to learn consequences somewhere.

MARIA
The phone rings. I pick it up quickly. It's my sister.

DAISY
I talked to Charles. He said that you shouldn't let your daughter watch so many movies. Maybe if you stayed home with her sometime she wouldn't have to act out.

MARIA
Okay. Stay home. Who's going to go to work?

DAISY
Is this about Michael?

MARIA
What?

DAISY
Did you tell her to say that about Daddy?

MARIA
What?

DAISY
Daddy is not Michael. Michael left you, not Daddy.

MARIA
I left Michael.

DAISY
At this time, Charles comes back into the room and he's standing there

DAISY (Cont'd.)
and he gives me a nod. And so I take a deep breath and say,

MARIA
"We've sent you the money. But don't call us again. We're not here to help you." That's what she said!

DAISY
(to audience)
Don't blame me. We had gone out of our way to help her.

MARIA
It's strange humor, but my sister's not the type to tell jokes. But then she remains silent. I turn completely numb and I say,

DAISY
"Okay." That's all she says! Not even a thank you! Not to mention a "I'm so sorry for interrupting your day, for upsetting you so much." Charles said he had never seen me so upset. He thinks the reason she didn't say anything more was that we had caught her in her game and so she gave up.

MARIA
I hung up. I had no words.

DAISY
Of course I had to help her. She's my sister. But Charles was right, I had to stand my ground. I just wish I could have saved that precious little girl from her mother.

MARIA
She was supposed to be my sister!

WENDY
Why do you have all of these expectations in sisters?

MARIA
Sisterhood means something to most people. Just not in our family. I had a sister and a mother, but they were just men—-brutal, unfeeling, cruel.

WENDY
Mom, that's so offensive.

MARIA
They lacked a female kindness, a softness. The yin force.

WENDY
That's all bullshit!

MARIA
No, it's symbolic; yin and yang are the two sides to keep you balanced.

WENDY
We did just fine without it.

MARIA
You don't have to be so literal.

WENDY
Don't you get that if we call the male force strong and the female force weak, then we create people like him who think that they have a right over people like us.

MARIA
What I mean is this idea of sisterhood...fine, of human compassion, I don't know when we lost it. I think back to when we were younger. We had a normal relationship. Never very close, but we definitely had a Namaste sort of connection. The recognizing-the-divine-within-you-even-though-I'm-pretty-sure-he-likes-me-more sort of practice. Like this pose.
(as teenager, to DAISY)
You're all dressed up.

DAISY

I have a date.

MARIA

Who with?

DAISY

Tom.

MARIA

Tom Rickens?

DAISY

Yes.

MARIA

Oh. You know—

DAISY

He's very nice, okay!

MARIA

I didn't say anything.

(DAISY leaves. MARIA sits on her bed reading.)

MARIA
(to WENDY)

I had dated Tom. Just briefly. I thought he was crazy for liking me; something had to be wrong with him. And so I ignored him--brutally. Mostly I was terrified. Anything that resembled someone trying to possess me, I ran! And then he started talking to my sister. Good for her.

(DAISY comes back in, shaken.)

MARIA
(to WENDY)

But I think he hurt her. Not that we ever talked about it. No, no, no. That is not appropriate to talk about in our family. We see the glassy eyes, but we don't have a language to ask about them. She just always resented me, I guess. And abandoning me was her fullest expression of the sisterhood pose.

DAISY
(to audience, laughing nervously)

That was a long time ago. Boys will be boys and high school was high school.

(beat)

It was nothing back then. Nothing that anyone would have done anything about. Something seen as unfortunate, but normal enough. All anyone would have said was why had I been there alone if I didn't want anything to happen. But then there was Charles and the other thing didn't matter anymore.

I may have lost a sister, but I was just being realistic. I would have lost Charles. Charlie would have lost his grandfather. There were too many variables. Ultimately is there a right or a wrong or is there just a what's going to hurt the least amount of people?

MARIA
(to audience)

I guess that's the Zen way. In her case there's a fine line between being Zen and just not caring.

(to WENDY)

I pack our things, shaking. The television is still blaring in the other room as the cab pulls into the driveway. I consider not picking up the money transfer, but my desperation outweighs my shame. We rent a car and on the ride to Sarah's, I make you explain it to me. I say, tell

me everything that happened. Everything that he did. I won't have you denied your voice. You say,

WENDY
(a chant held through MARIA's following line, swelling with violent intensity)
Ommmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.

MARIA
(speaking over top of the chant)
Om is the sound of all the noises in the world coming together. Each word that escapes your mouth shatters the world until all that is left is fine dust. The past, the present, and the future all exist in Om. In this space of transcendent reality, I inhale your words, hoping they won't poison you.

We manage to forget on the surface. We survive in spite of the tragedy that casts its shadow on us. You are a fairly happy child.

WENDY
(as teenager, to audience)
I throw tantrums all of the time.
(as child)
I hate you, mom!

MARIA
I tell myself that your fits of anger are because I have fed you unbalanced food. I don't want to admit it could be anything else.

WENDY
You're a bad mom!

MARIA
You're a voice to all of the negative thoughts I've internalized.

WENDY
Leave me alone! Go away! I hate you!
(as teenager)
Grams was right, you never knew how to discipline me. You just absorb my anger. You don't even react.

MARIA
I channel all of my affection toward you.

WENDY
And I shoot right back at you.

I kick the chairs!

(MARIA does chair pose. WENDY kicks her down.)

WENDY
Hit the tables!

(MARIA does table pose. WENDY hits her.)

MARIA
And in the space of this violence, when you were bursting right in front of me, I lost you.

(MARIA tries to hug WENDY, but WENDY dodges defensively and sprints away.)

MARIA
You were so slippery.

WENDY
Is that when I started running?

MARIA
You kept this need to run in your bones.

WENDY
I just always thought I was crazy.

MARIA
You weren't. You were just hurt. And I tried to distract you so that you could heal.

MARIA (Cont'd.)
(as mother to a young child)
Happy birthday! Let's bake a cake! Mmm birthday cake! Happy birthday, Wendy!

WENDY
(as a child)
How much spelt flour do we need?

MARIA
Well, how many people are we having over?

WENDY
You, me, Sarah, Toby, Mrs. Kim, Nicky, Leah, Dawn, Dawn's mom, and Jude. Our whole family.
(as teenager)
What a cornball.

MARIA
So how many people is that?

WENDY
(as child)
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10!

MARIA
That's right! What does that mean?

WENDY
It means we better have a lot of flour.

MARIA
What it means is that you are so loved. Everyone is excited to see you!

WENDY
Look at the cards and presents! Wow!

WENDY (Cont'd)
(as adult)
Going through some old drawers and boxes later, I once found this card from my aunt. It said something like this.

DAISY
(brightly and cheerfully)
Happy birthday Wendy! You're already 7 years old!

WENDY
Was it 7? Or 6? I can't remember. But you get the idea.

DAISY
(with bright cheeriness)
I hope we can see you sometime in the future once things have calmed down! Happy birthday, birthday, birthday!
(to the audience, more seriously)
I would have said something a lot different if I knew that my sister wouldn't take the money out and probably never show her the card. I would have said Wendy, I'm your aunt, but I should have been your mother. It's not too late! Come live with me and have a real family. I'll love you and take care of you much more than she ever could.
(an aside)
Charles and I tried and tried to have another one, but I lost them all. It's probably for the best. This way I can fully devote myself to Charlie. If I had been an only child, I probably would have been a lot happier, too.

But, still, I always wanted a little girl. Someone to dress up in little dresses. Make her a homemade cake for her birthday, with homemade pink icing. I bet her mom doesn't do that for her! I'd teach her all my recipes. I can't teach Charlie how to make chocolate chip cookies that are soft and chewy at the same time. He wouldn't appreciate it like a girl would.

Charlie's always running around; I can't keep up. I was never the physical type. Always too embarrassed at people looking at me when I moved. If I had a little girl, a soft and gentle girl, I wouldn't have to worry about that. I could have a friend at home, someone to sit with me in the kitchen and

DAISY (Cont'd.)
talk while I made cupcakes or pies.
(back to the letter)
Anyway, I miss you, Wendy, and hopefully one day we can be together

WENDY & DAISY
(reading the letter in unison)
We love you so much! Love, Aunt Daisy, Uncle Charles, and Cousin Charlie.

WENDY
(to MARIA)
Bullshit. I never even saw this person and she was all "I love you!"

MARIA
She wanted to make me feel bad. Never reaching out to contact me, only sending me you letters twice a year.

But I'm sorry you didn't know what it was like to have a large family.

WENDY
It's okay, mom. That kind of family just isn't part of my experience. I like the family you pick better than the family you're born into. The others just let you down.

MARIA
I'm your family. I have let you down, too.

WENDY
Not you, mom. I'm not going to hate you. I just hate them.

MARIA
Please forgive me for your suffering.

WENDY
You're the one who's suffering. Not me.

WENDY (Cont'd.)
Do you want some miso soup?

MARIA
A taste of my own medicine?

WENDY
They're not worth it.

MARIA
You could just as easily give up on me.

WENDY
I have no reason to. It was so long ago it's irrelevant.

MARIA
It's not irrelevant. We carry around these memories in our bones. And I think you've been scared of getting close to others just because of what happened in the past.

WENDY
Yeah. I guess.
(to audience)
But here's the pose I won't show her.

It's called "Awkward!" for a reason. You stand on your tippy toes. Like you're all hot stuff. You're young enough to get away with anything and old enough to know better. With your own income you can buy the clothes that she doesn't have to know about.

You attempt to strut on your tippy toes, trying to seem confident, but this pose is a beast. Shaky on your new legs, you wobble, pathetically. You're faltering like crazy, you can't even stand up straight! You manage to get up there, breathe, keep your cool, but when it's time for step two, you freak, you clamp your legs together, wooah you're not ready for this one yet! You sink to the ground, humiliated. Shit! You try to slink in without being seen, but you see your mom crying and you're all like, oh shit, did

WENDY (Cont'd.)
she find out?

(MARIA starts breathing heavily.)

MARIA
Wendy...

WENDY
I'm sorry, mom!

MARIA
For what?

WENDY
I don't know...why are you crying?

MARIA
I'm not. It's pranayama breathing.

WENDY
What?

MARIA
Pranayama breathing. It cleanses your grief. It only sounds sad because it's hard to confront these emotions.

WENDY
What emotions?

MARIA
Letting you down again. I got a phone call.

DAISY
Daddy's in the hospital. He had a stroke and his kidneys are completely

DAISY (Cont'd.)
failing. I'm not telling you to come down here to see him. But dialysis doesn't last very long.

WENDY
(to MARIA)
So what?

MARIA
My father's about to die.

WENDY
There are strangers dying in the hospital right now. Are we going to visit them, too?

MARIA
I need to see him.

WENDY
After what he did?

MARIA
This may be my last chance.

WENDY
For what?

MARIA
I need to confront him while he's still alive. To ask him how he did it. Why he did it.

WENDY
It's been 15 years. We're free.

MARIA
But it's a part of who we are. We carry our past experiences with us every day. They shape who we are. And so to be fully free of their burden, we must become fully aware of the truth.

The spiritual warrior pose.

WENDY
Whatchu gonna do—sword fight your soul?

MARIA
She's not violent, but a spiritual warrior is brave. She battles with the universal enemy: avidya, self-ignorance, which the ultimate source of all of our suffering.

Will you come with me?

WENDY
For the freakin' masochism pose?

MARIA
To be strong we must confront who we are and where we came from.

WENDY
It's okay, mom.

MARIA
You'll go?

WENDY
I'll go there for you. Not for them.

MARIA
Family's family.

WENDY
You're right. You're my family. The others are strangers.

MARIA
Thank you.

WENDY
The let's hurry up and get it over with pose.

(WENDY and MARIA walk to MARIA's parents' house.)

MARIA
There's the house I grew up in. I haven't been here in almost 20 years. What am I supposed to do now?

WENDY
Start with a pose.

(MARIA stands up tall. MAMA enters.)

MAMA
After all these years, you're just standing there like that?

MARIA
I'm not. I'm a mountain.
(to WENDY)
I don't know what follows next in the routine.

WENDY
(to MARIA)
Now it's time for the embrace your mother with love pose.

(MARIA doesn't move.)

WENDY
Try, mom.

MARIA
(not moving)
This is my fullest expression of the pose.

WENDY
Focus your attention. Surrender to the pose.

MARIA
I can't.

WENDY
Refocus your intention. The embrace your mother with love because your father is dying pose.

MARIA
I can't. I don't know how to do it.

WENDY
I'll show you. The embrace your mother with love because her father is dying pose.

(WENDY hugs MARIA.)

MAMA
So, this is my granddaughter.

WENDY
Hello.

MAMA
You've grown a bit. Give your grandmother a hug.

(WENDY hugs MAMA.)

MARIA
(to WENDY)
And through it all, you stay completely respectful.

WENDY
Only as I would be to a stranger.

MARIA
We come to the end of the series, awaiting the last pose, what we've been building up to in our practice.

WENDY
Finally! I'm worn out.

MARIA
But this is not the time for sleeping.

WENDY
Mom!

MARIA
No, now is the time for the hardest pose of all. Savasana, the corpse pose. To see your dying father, you must first calm your mind and become weightless. A corpse seems inactive, but Savasana is a battleground. Locking yourself in the darkness of your mind, alone with your thoughts—that's the scariest thing out there. It becomes a time to conquer, a time to transcend, a time to confront death fearlessly.

We enter the room where he lies. When I look at my dying father in Savasana, I am unable to believe how convincingly he has mastered the pose. How could someone so cruel become so Zen? He is completely at rest.

His eyes do not anxiously flutter like we mortals do in this pose. Instead, he appears completely at peace. I try to dig up the feelings of pain and anger so I can stop drowning in them. I try to imagine him as the tyrant,

as the evil-doer. I want to shake him from his peace and confront him with the pain he put us through. But all I see is a child in front of me.

(to WENDY)

It's the end of the series and there I go, betraying you again!

WENDY

You're not betraying me. You saved me.

MARIA

I should have taught you more strengthening poses so that you could get out on the road again.

WENDY

There's time. Right now, I just need to be still.

MARIA

And we realize that Savasana isn't the end. We roll to our right sides-- the sun side—-to connect us back to the world. We rise, revitalized with fresh life, with strength and purpose. It's only the beginning now.

WENDY

Thank you for this beginning. Namaste, Mother.

MARIA

Namaste, Daughter.

END OF PLAY

Contributor's Notes

Kevin Adler is a Ph.D. candidate at Georgia State University.

Hayley Gallagher is a native of Roswell, Georgia whose mother recognized her love of writing well before she did. A senior at Agnes Scott College, Hayley is completing her Bachelor of Arts degree with concentrations in English Literature-Creative Writing and Music. She plans to pursue a MAT for Secondary English so that she may convert classroom captives to her love of literature and language. She views her essay "Sing Us a Song" as the completion of a goal she once wrote on a Post-It note in orange colored pencil: be published.

Jes Gearing is a native of Atlanta and a senior at Emory University. She will graduate this May with a B.A. in English and Environmental Studies. Her work is forthcoming in *The Hollins Critic*.

Karen Gentry is a finalist in this year's American Short Fiction short story contest and the winner of the 2008 World's Best Short Short Story contest. Her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Southeast Review*, *The New Orleans Review*, *NOÖ Journal*, and *New Delta Review*.

Chelsea Guenther is a junior at Agnes Scott College majoring in religious studies with a concentration in social justice. In the spring of 2009 she will be studying abroad in Oaxaca, Mexico with the School for International Training. She fell in love with creative nonfiction in a class she took to fulfill the fine arts requirement of her degree. Chelsea would like to thank Dr. Cozzens and the members of ENG 200 and 300 for their encouragement, criticism, and support.

Louisa Hill is a senior at Agnes Scott College. Two of her plays have been produced in Greenwich Village and Atlanta. Recent awards include being named the winner of the Georgia Theatre Conference's Best Play 2008 in the college division and a finalist in NYC's City Attic Theatre's play competition. Currently Louisa is a playwriting apprentice at Horizon Theatre, a tutor at the Agnes Scott Writing Center, the president of Triota (the Women's Studies Honor Society), and a radical blogger.

Sara Hughes earned her B.A. from Mercer University in 2002, and earned her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from GC&SU in 2004. She is a certified Montessori teacher and spent four years teaching preschool and kindergarten at Montessori of Macon. She is currently working on a PhD in Poetry Writing at Georgia State University. She is obsessed with Bruce Springsteen and will talk to anybody wearing cowboy boots.

The associate editor of *New South*, **Dionne Irving** has published in Big Muddy and Teacher as Writer. She was a finalist in *Glimmer Train's* 2008 Family Matters contest and placed third in College Language Association's Creative Writing short story competition in 2007. Irving is a graduate of Florida State University and Rhode Island College, and is currently earning her doctorate in creative writing at Georgia State University.

Hally Joseph is a sophomore at Georgia State University studying creative writing. Although she enjoys writing fiction, she takes the proverbial "write what you know" very seriously, as she turns to nonfiction to write about the things she knows all too well: being raised by a quirky and loving family; laughing at herself when she finds herself completely

out of her element; and reaching the age of twenty with the recognition that she should prepare to be surprised.

Simon Kress was born and raised in Camden, Maine. He now lives in Atlanta, where he is writing a doctoral dissertation at Emory University on violence in contemporary Irish poetry. He has published poems and fiction in *The GSU Review* and *Red Line Blues*, and has won an Academy of American Poets prize for his poetry.

Elaine Koutroulias is a second and a half generation Greek from Spartanburg, South Carolina. She is a junior at Agnes Scott College, double majoring in Creative Writing and Biology. She enjoys swing dancing and can only cook eggs.

Liane LeMaster's fiction has appeared in the *Chattahoochee Review*, the *Mississippi Review*, *Sub-Lit*, and *Smokelong Quarterly*. She won the Porter Fleming Literary Prize and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize, the Arts & Letters Fiction Prize and the New Millennium Fiction Award. She was the recipient of the 2006 Paul Bowles Fellowship for Creative Writing at Georgia State University where she is completing her MFA. A graduate of Northwestern University, Liane spent several years in Chicago acting, directing, and producing theater and serving as literary manager of Amicus Theatre. She lives in Atlanta with her husband and two daughters.

Andrea J. Love is a first-year at Agnes Scott College, hailing from the far away city of Seattle, Washington. She does not know what her major will be, but loves Theatre, Music, English, Political Science, and almost every other class she's ever taken. In her free time when she is not watching musical theatre videos on Youtube or poking people on Facebook, she enjoys reading books by Neil Gaiman, J.K. Rowling, Terry Pratchett, Mary Renault, Phillip Pullman, Audrey Niffenegger, and of course all the authors in the essay.

James May is the Editor-in-Chief of *New South*. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *32 Poems*, *Cimarron*, and *Sixty-Six*.

Nick McRae has studied at the University of West Georgia and Masaryk University. His art and poetry appear in *DIAGRAM*, *Stirring*, *Shampoo*, *Rock & Sling*, and elsewhere. He is a former Bucknell Seminar for Younger Poets fellow. Nick has served as Editor of the AWP award-winning journal *Eclectic*, and as Editorial Assistant for both *Lifewriting Annual* and *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*.

Jessica Moore is a senior at Agnes Scott College and was also a finalist for the 2007 Writers' Festival for her poem "Story From Perry Georgia". An Art History and Latin American and Caribbean studies double major, the themes and images in Jessica's work are often a product of her personal experiences and ruminations on her Afro-Cuban-American heritage.

Candace Nadon is a student in State Georgia University's PhD program in Creative Writing. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing from the Stonecoast Low-Residency MFA in Creative Writing in 2005. Her work has appeared in *Dogwood: A Journal of Poetry and Prose*. Before beginning school at Georgia State, Candace taught gifted children at the Ricks

Center for Gifted Children at the University of Denver and taught high school English. She is a Colorado native and spends her school breaks and summers in the mountains of Western Colorado.

Molly Saunders is a first year student at Agnes Scott College from Birmingham, Alabama, planning on majoring in English Literature. Molly has won several awards for creative writing, including a 2008 NFAA young ARTS Honorable Mention and Merit Award (for short fiction and poetry), the Alabama Writer's Forum 2008 Portfolio Scholarship award, and AWF's first place award for Dramatic Writing. Molly attended high school at the Alabama School of Fine Arts in their Creative Writing Department.

Born in California and raised in Ghana, **Jennifer Anne Sefa-Boakye** is an English Literature-Creative Writing major at Agnes Scott College. She is honored to have been selected as a finalist in the Writer's Festival and is excited to see her name in print.

Graduating from GSU this year with his MFA in poetry, **Austin Segrest** is poetry editor of *New South*, and the winner of *Iron Horse Literary Review's* Discovered Voices Prize. A 2008 Tennessee Williams Scholar at the Sewanee Writers' Conference, his poems appear in several journals including *The Yale Review*.

A Marietta native, **Cheryl Stiles** works as a librarian at Kennesaw State University. She is currently a doctoral student in the Department of English at Georgia State University. Her essays, poems, and reviews have appeared in numerous journals such as *Atlanta Review, Poet Lore*, *GARGOYLE*, *Storysouth*, *Slant*, *Pedestal Magazine*, *POEM*, and *Plainsongs*.

Writers' Festival Previous Guests

1972 May Sarton, Michael Mott, Marion Montgomery
1973 Robert Penn Warren, George Garrett
1974 Hollis Summers, Larry Rubin
1975 Richard Eberhardt, Josephine Jacobsen
1976 Reynolds Price, Michael Mott, Nathalie Fitzsimmons Anderson
1977 Eudora Welty, Guy Davenport, Josephine Jacobsen
1978 John Young, Larry Rubin, Josephine Jacobsen
1979 Harry Crews, Donald Davis, Josephine Jacobsen
1980 Howard Nemerov, Josephine Jacobsen
1981 James Merrill, Theodore Weiss, Josephine Jacobsen
1982 Margaret Atwood, Doris Betts, Josephine Jacobsen
1983 Donald Justice, Josephine Jacobsen, Gretchen Schultz
1984 Richard Wilbur, Linda Pastan, Gretchen Schultz, Kay Stevenson
1985 Maxine Kumin, Greg Johnson, Gretchen Schultz
1986 Denise Levertov, Andrew Lytle, Memye Curtis Tucker
1987 Tillie Olsen, Memye Curtis Tucker, Jane Zanca
1988 Michael Harper, Anne River Siddons, Memye Curtis Tucker
1989 James Dickey, Memye Curtis Tucker, Elizabeth Bartlett
1990 Josephine Jacobsen, Alfred Uhry, Memye Curtis Tucker
1991 Gloria Naylor, Sharon Olds, Memye Curtis Tucker
1992 Rita Dove, Robert Coover, Greg Johnson, John Stone, Memye Curtis Tucker
1993 Jorie Graham, Charles Johnson, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Memye Curtis Tucker
1994 Carolyn Forché, Melissa Fay Greene, Lee Abbott, Mary Kratt
1995 Michael Harper, Peter Carey, Julie Kalendek, Memye Curtis Tucker
1996 Alicia Ostriker, Philip Lopate, Joy Williams, Sally Ann Stevens
1997 Jane Smiley, Katha Pollitt, Pearl Cleage, Anjail Rashida Ahmad
1998 Jamaica Kincaid, Thylias Moss, Sherman Yellen
1999 Tim O'Brien, Eavan Boland, Frank Manley, Meyme Curtis Tucker
2000 Joyce Carol Oates, Li-Young Lee, Jim Grimsley, Robert Earl Price
2001 John Updike, Marsha Norman,Sharon Olds, Anjail Rashida Ahmad
2002 Marilyn Nelson, Bapsi Sidhwa, Scott Russell Sanders
2003 Julia Alvarez, Greg Williamson, Cary Bynum
2004 Chitra Divakaruni, Bo Ball
2005 Oliver Sacks, Linda Hogan
2006 Paul Muldoon, Percival Everett, Nathalie Fitzsimmons Anderson
2007 Suzan-Lori Parks, Yusef Komunyakaa, Beatriz Rivera-Barnes
2008 Martín Espada, Gillian Lee-Fong-Farris, Rubén Martínez
2009 Anita Desai, Junot Díaz, Quiara Alegría Hudes, Memye Curtis Tucker