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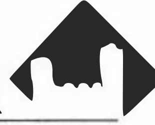
The Graduate School 

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Mckenzie Dial

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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“In Motion”

by

McKenzie Dial

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

in the graduate school, Eastern Illinois University

Charleston, Illinois

Spring 2017

For Madison, *my ride or die*,
and for my grandparents,
who believed I was never too young
to sit behind a steering wheel.

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I would first like to thank my family for a childhood rich with experience and love, and my fiancé Madison, for his endless trust, support, and conversation. Without them, this collection would have never reached fruition. I would also like to thank my director, Dr. Charlotte Pence, for her unceasing encouragement and confidence in me to build this project into what I wanted it to be. Her generous advice and engaging feedback have been crucial to my writing, and I am honored to call her my mentor and friend. Dr. Melissa Ames and Dr. Robert Martínez have also invested themselves in this project, always offering me a place to explore my interests, whether that be through critical studies of *The Fast and the Furious* series or hallway conversations about object studies. I would also like to thank Dr. Daiva Markelis for her kind words, warm humor, and encouraging feedback. This collection was built through the support from these incredible people.

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A Critical Introduction to "In Motion"

I can't remember how old I was, or what field we were in, or what tractor manual was beneath my butt as my grandfather first propped me up to the height of the grain truck driver's seat. What I do know is that the truck was one of the biggest pieces of equipment I had ever seen. Sitting behind the wheel, the road ahead was barely visible as I craned my neck to glance beyond the dash. My grandfather laughed and brushed the soybean dust from his Pioneer jacket.

"You look pretty good up there." His smile was made brighter from the contrast of the gear grease smudged across his cheeks.

"I don't think I'm big enough," I mumbled. From outside the cab, the truck looked empty. He had only asked that I drive in a straight line toward the next field, which would have been fine if I hadn't known the truck cost 500,000 quarters more than what I had already collected in my bunny bank.

He shook his head in response: "You're plenty big. Can you reach the gas?" I stretched my legs toward the pedals, and although I could barely feel the brake beneath my boot, I nodded.

"Good. Just turn the key, hold the brake, then slide that knob into drive." He pointed at the gear stick mounted to the steering column. "Coast to that field up there. I'll be right behind you."

My hand, no bigger than a deck of cards, gripped the key. The engine turned over, the exhaust, smooth and deep, but I wasn't tall enough to see the cloud of smoke billowing from the dual rear pipes. Flattening my back and stretching toward the floor, I pressed my foot against the brake and reached above me to pull down on the shifter. The

truck lunged forward, so I shot up in my seat and grabbed the steering wheel as the tires kept rolling.

My grandfather's voice chirped through the CB radio static: "Keep her steady, girl. You've got it!"

Memories like these feel endless, perhaps even repetitive, because as I get older, I find myself remembering moments of my daily life that overshadow the keynotes of my childhood. Birthday parties are eclipsed by fishing trips. Funerals are surpassed by tractor rides. The simplest of memories—holding up the heads of my father's trophy bucks in the front yard; spraying up gravel with the rear four-wheeler tires at the farm sheds; watching Diet Coke cans roll around on the bowed windshield of our Case IH combines— take precedent over events expected to define childhood experience, coming together to build a narrative and erect my own quiet personal history.

In Jo Ann Beard's essay, "Cousins," she ruminates on a similarly quiet history created between her and her cousin: fishing together in a flat-bottomed boat, an evening of drunken dancing at a backwoods bar, and driving matching bicycles with baby dolls and baskets down the street during a community parade. These are scenes of passing time that do not define Beard's life, but rather fill the space between the course of events in her life that seem to conventionally matter. An Eric Clapton concert is detailed with the same richness and intensity used to describe Beard's grandfather's funeral. An afternoon spent playing cribbage echoes the details of a wedding reception. Beard pairs an attention to genealogical detail—meditation on her aunt and mother and conversations with her sister and cousins—with field study and personal experience, highlighting events that would seem insignificant in our own lives.

In the same way, my relationship with agriculture and automobile engineering functions as filler in the process of my daily life. As a collection, "In Motion" isn't just about my struggle with hypothyroidism, a painful slumber party, or fixing up an '84 Corvette. It's about building bridges that examine our close relationships with the necessities that both agriculture and the automotive industry provide for the world. A part of me wonders if this act of bridge-building is what makes it so difficult to speak about. Most days, I'll laugh about my interest in modern day muscle or lifted Jeeps such as my own, understanding that the industry's move toward sustainable energy and smaller, less powerful cars is a tactical one; the automobile industry, especially in the United States, follows the consumer, not the environment. I soon refocus my energy on Dodge's updated Hellcat motor, or the newest John Deere model that somehow manages to drive itself. In a world where most are so far removed yet dependent on agriculture and the automobile, I'm as close as I can get.

The closeness I describe is modeled throughout the collection. In "One Ride," a father-daughter relationship is weaved between the death of NASCAR legend Dale Earnhardt. "Josie" pairs a medical diagnosis with routine car maintenance. In "Crashing," painting ceramic butterflies and watching eggs cook in a skillet exist alongside a family history of car accidents. Each essay maneuvers between the extraordinary and the mundane while simultaneously building toward this dependency on automobiles and agriculture. Jo Ann Beard's "Cousins" and "The Fourth State of Matter" also move in a similar way to my essays. She discusses the complexities of a failing marriage and her dying collie alongside a workplace shooting. The details of daily life—the dog's frequent bathroom breaks, boxes full of her husband's suit coats, an attic infested with squirrels—

are wedged between the news of the school shooting that results in her husband's death. Through these moments, Beard relies on both detail and dialogue as the cornerstone of her character development. Aunts, cousins, and friends are not only described by how they speak, but also by how they act when they are listening. Moments between dialogue, such as Caroline's chain smoking in "The Fourth State of Matter" or Wendell's insistence to fix her hair after a nearly tragic car accident in "Cousins," draws attention to those speaking, often eclipsing the details of others involved in the conversation. Although Beard also uses conversation to develop the plot of her essays, the way in which she writes each scene reveals the personality of each character. These descriptions highlight how important other people are to Beard's work.

Unlike Beard, dialogue appears with restraint in most of my work. Rather than emphasize moments of conversation, I develop narrative from scenes of observation, often focusing on what others are doing when they are not speaking. In "One Ride," I describe a scene where my father fires his gun at the geese on our lawn. This moment appears entirely as my own narrative, stressing the qualities of my father through his own actions as opposed to his words. Similarly, "Josie" relies on a single moment of speech to transition between sections. Each scene that follows strips back the dialogue, magnifying the complexities of what is taking place during that moment. My decision to build each essay through accentuating action and slimming down dialogue in most scenes reiterates how crucial experience is throughout this collection. At its core, "In Motion" is about acceptance of place, personality, and self. By redirecting each scene back to my own memories, thoughts, and narrative devices, the collection becomes, in a sense, an extension of my own voice.

Emphasis of the self is necessary not just in creative nonfiction, but in any literature where the writer's voice is underrepresented. There are few published literary works where women discuss agriculture and automobile engineering, and those that do are mostly published in fiction. Because creative nonfiction constructs its authority through the dual support of the personal and the factual, it presents the perfect opportunity for women to discuss their own experience with the industries, thus integrating into the dominantly male fields. With the exception of a collection published in 1997 entitled *Ladies, Start Your Engines: Women Writers on Cars and the Road*, my search for nonfiction literature written by women about automobile engineering was void. Strong works of creative nonfiction are often derived from the establishment of sincere knowledge and experience, as well as narrative truth. I believe my own experiences are rooted in that tradition, thus empowering "In Motion" with such authority.

Because few women have specifically written about automotive engineering, many of the critical texts I have encountered are also male-driven. Peter Wollen and Joe Kerr's *Autopia: Cars and Culture* provides substantial history on the automobile's global impact. In *Motorsports and American Culture: From Demolition Derbies to NASCAR*, Mark D. Howell and John D. Miller discusses America's cultural impact on the automobile, defining the car's impact on social class in the United States. Their work especially informed my own, as it complements the anecdotal research I have developed growing up in a working class family that participated in motorsports. My father rarely missed a NASCAR race, and my grandfather often brought me and my brother to local racing and driving events at mud parks and county fair tracks. Even now, I'm marrying into a family with a tradition of driving in demolition derbies and restoring classic muscle

cars. My interest in these experiences also led me to Paul Ingrassia's *Engines of Change: A History of the American Dream*, as his research juxtaposes the evolution of automobile engineering with popular culture in such a way that explores the necessity for private transportation in rural areas. His book expressed just how important both motorsports and running vehicles are to those living in small communities across the United States. These three sources perhaps best capture moments in which automobile engineering and agricultural history intersect as products of rural living, which was essential for my collection's progress.

An exception to the male-driven texts, Deborah Clarke's *Driving Women: Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth-Century America* attempts to restructure automotive history and culture, particularly through its representation in fiction, by focusing on the role cars have played in women's lives throughout the stories she discusses. For example, Joyce Carol Oates, in "Lover," writes about a woman who uses her vehicle as an accomplice in a traffic accident where she attempts to kill a man who has recently broke up with her. Although Clarke *does* draw on a tradition of women writing about automobiles, the ways in which these writers are depicting the automobile lends itself to symbolism, rather than in-depth understanding of automotive engineering and the automobile industry. In "In Motion," vehicles are not limited to symbols of domesticity or agency, but rather objects of mechanical complexity used to further explore the self, primarily throughout childhood.

I cannot help but diverge back to childhood because childhood is where it all began—riding in the wooden bed of my grandfather's dump truck or directing my father and his hitch to the precise location of his bass boat—and from there, I just kept learning.

I wrecked my first four-wheeler when I was eight. I ran my first car out of gas around twelve. By fifteen, I had purchased my own 1990 Dodge Dynasty through the money I had earned waiting tables and serving ice cream cones at a diner in town. It sat in our driveway for a year before I passed my license examination on the first try. To me, it never mattered that I was involved in two or three car accidents, or that I received my first speeding ticket less than three months after I hit the road. It also doesn't matter that I watch my mother's ineptitude with vehicle maintenance, often struggling to understand why she never changes the oil or rotates the tires herself. During high school, I would stop by our local auto parts store after classes and pick up a bottle of brake fluid. My Dynasty had a leak somewhere within the line, but I wasn't sure how to fix it. I would park outside my house beneath the motion-sensor flood lights and pop the hood, staring down at a series of tubes, gears, and belts, unscrew the cap to the brake line reservoir, and pour the thick liquid into the line.

Growing up, I never realized the gap between industry and public perception. Both with automobiles and agriculture, there is an attitude amongst Americans where the national reliance on transportation, food, and animal by-products does not match the interest or knowledge in either of these things. Although both industries are consumer-centered, the public often fears that the production from either industry is out to end them. Sources such as *Organic Authority* and *GMWatch* often promote anti-GMO articles void of any independent research or studies despite the massive amount of scientific evidence promoting biosciences and the safety of genetically modified food. In 2014, University of California-Davis Department of Animal Science geneticist Dr. Alison Van Eenennaam published a conclusive study regarding livestock productivity and health

data. She focused on the health effects regarding the use of non-GMO and GMO feed in livestock for the past 29 years, discovering that GM feed is both safe and nutritionally equivalent to organic alternatives (Eenennaam). The rebuttal of such scientific evidence is unfounded, and also detrimental to the technological advances that have and still are taking place throughout both industries. We want to believe the worst: that animals are mostly mistreated, or that bigger agriculture operations tear up the land and render it useless; that the automobile industry takes advantage of the consumer, or wants to see the environment destroyed. We want to believe these things because it gives us something to fight for. Despite my own efforts to change this perception, it seems the gap is widening at an alarming rate. This collection of essays is an attempt to open communication—the first slats of a bridge closing the gap.

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Consider the Car

Consider the floorboards: spaces where heels meet speed, two pedals, maybe three, lined up near a firing squad of feet. A place where pebbles gather beneath pieces of borrowed carpet, smoothed down by traffic, ashtray for specks that float back through the cracked window. A place of rest on backroads and highways; somewhere for the girl to sing and stretch and strain her eyes in the streetlamp fog. Consider the brake: a forced stop controlled through lines of fluid. An ebb and flow, the tide of a controlled moon. Brake—meaning *stop*—but fluid is always moving, lulling back when light eclipses street lamps and fast food highway signs, exposing a graffitied water tower near a hometown exit. Consider the fuel: a pedal meaning go, meaning move, meaning change. The way hands tremble when they're too short on cash. The way those shoulders carry, and legs sulk, and the man second in line extends a twenty in exchange for a smile and service. Consider the clutch: optional, unwanted, a disappointment when families ask for sedans with four-speed *automatics*. "The windshield pedal," a boy explains, because forgetting shifts is easier when the gears move themselves. If the foot mistakes the brake for a clutch, the body loses itself, waking up in a glass blanket. If a girl mistakes the car for a home, she'll lose herself, too.

Josie

"Tell me how an engine works." I sat down in the corner of the garage and waited for an answer. Madison and I had spent the last hour replacing the oil filter beneath the frame of his car, and I was hungry to understand how each part functioned.

He tossed me a cling-wrapped ham-and-cheese sandwich and shook his head in response: "It's just not that simple."

I stared at the car parked across from us. A few weeks ago, we took a daytrip south and haggled with two brothers over a 1999 Pontiac Firebird: leather bucket seats, T-tops, and 150-thousand miles. Built on a solid F-platform and coated in General Motors' signature bright red paint, the car's model had descended from generations of American muscle. I wanted nothing more than to reach out and touch it.

At the time, it didn't matter that the driver's side door had a huge crack running eight inches down from the window. It also didn't matter that the rear fenders had been pelted with chunks of hail and wild shopping carts, or that the cracked chrome rims were eroded from brake pad dust. I had convinced Madison that all those things gave the car character.

"I don't care that she's a piece of crap," I crooned. "She's *my* piece of crap." The Firebird was like an underground club, only this admittance fee was a stifling fee of three-thousand dollars and a piece of paper that let the government know we belonged to one another. There was something in that sense of ownership that overshadowed the car's flaws.

But Madison warned me of the dangers of falling in love: worshipping the car's smooth lines, teasing her hardware, and draining my bank account on a romance with a hunk of metal. I ignored him, even after the problems started.

When the lifters went out, I blamed an afternoon of city driving. When the fuel pump quit, I pointed fingers at exhaustion.

"She shouldn't have been made to drive longer than two hours without a break," I pleaded. "She's old. We have to take it easy on her."

It didn't even faze me that despite the brand's reputation, my particular purchase wasn't fast. Zero to sixty in seven seconds at best, yet I would still brag, telling everyone that she was unstoppable. The best nights were those when I'd tag along to Madison's drag races. His cars were always faster than mine: a 2004 Nissan 350Z, a 2006 Pontiac GTO, and his favorite, a 2001 Pontiac Trans Am. The drag strip was like a big family reunion and the cars were the children. Families worked together, waxing hoods and checking fluids, bragging about what each car had accomplished throughout the year. Brandon wanted everyone to know his '04 Mustang had been fitted with aftermarket gears: "Four-tens," he'd sing, placing the emphasis on the latter half of the phrase before pulling out his lip and filling it with chewing tobacco.

Unlike taking care of children, everyone here appreciated run-ins with the law. It was good news to hear one of the kids had been clocked well-over the speed limit on a county road. It was even better news when Madison let us know he had been caught on the street by a couple of state boys. He had raced a Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution stoplight-to-stoplight, only stopping when Johnny Law was hot on his trail for spinning the tires. Madison held up the written warning like a report card, full of pride at the

scribbled line written with the officer's pen: "Squeal/squall tires – racing." The warning was better than an entire year of straight As.

During the races, Madison was almost always the first driver off the mark. I would lean on the fence, fingers intertwined with the metal loops, and hold my breath until he crossed the finish line. The announcer's voice boomed over the loudspeaker: "Madison Fritscher in the '06 GTO in first. He got right off the line!"

"Yes, Betty!" I'd holler, addressing his car. We would meet near the end of the strip, pop the hood, and prepare for a second run. Each victory was captured in my memory like the still clicks of a stereoscope reel.

I named our Firebird "Josie."

***

"It works like a big vacuum," Madison responded with a shrug. He picked up a pair of plyers and squeezed a stray wire into a butt connector. With one small click, the connection linked battery power to the Firebird's high-beam headlights, filling the garage with light. Our smiles cut through the engine sludge coating our faces. I noticed his jeans: light indigo wash, brass button fly, rips and tears where skin peeked through the denim like a game of hide and seek. He only put them on when he knew he'd be getting dirty. The sticky sweet scent of coolant lingered on the fabric.

Earlier that day, his mother had told us a story about a similar Firebird she had owned nearly twenty years ago and how every night, she picked three-year-old Madison up at his grandparents' house after work. She spoke of the air, and I imagined it bitter on

the tongue like over-steeped tea. Through the Firebird's long, tinted windows, the wisps of rain and ice turned the outside world into a shaken snowglobe.

She said she arrived safely at her parents' house. After parking the Firebird in the driveway, she shuffled to the front door, careful not to slip on a spot of ice. Inside, Madison played silently with a handful of toy cars, his baby fingers wrapped around his favorite—the orange body of a model 1970 Plymouth Road Runner—a small-scale twin of the car his grandfather kept tucked away in the garage. His mother scooped him up and stuffed his stubby arms into coat sleeves.

During her story, she explained that winter storms always seemed to pick up in the evening. I imagined the pockets of snow dancing along the driveway, twisting and turning like a violent waltz, and how through the frozen tree tops, the wind screamed, sealing pockets of ice around the car's windows. Despite her parents' warnings and the weather alerts on the radio, his mother wanted nothing more than to get home. She carried Madison to the passenger door, buckling him into the rear-facing carseat. After adjusting her own seatbelt, she fiddled with the radio dial before shifting into drive.

As she continued the story, I imagined her flying down Lincoln Street and catching a patch of ice, sliding sideways and nearly missing a mailbox and scraping by two other passing vehicles, continuing to spin. Avoiding contact with every obstacle in her way, the Firebird's tires scraped and squealed, melting the ice from the heat of the rubber. When the car finally rested, she pulled over to the shoulder of the road, shaking and sick.

Madison, giggling quietly in his carseat, held out his little arms and asked her to "spin it again."

***

"Well, it kind of works in a circle," Madison said, explaining how an intake manifold has eight slots, each belonging to a port on the cylinder head and how the butterfly valve opened and closed each time pressure was placed on the gas pedal. He motioned for me to come closer.

By his side, I studied the series of tubes and gears hidden beneath the hood: the engine, stationary, yet singing. A large pipe jutted out from the motor's front, wrapping around its plastic façade and connecting to an air filter near the tire reserve. I pointed, excusing myself from asking what it was and instead imagining the tube's possible uses.

He was accustomed to my quiet badgering; how I relied on him like a reserve of unfiltered knowledge, a tower of fact and logic. When he finally described the pipe, he explained how the throttle body communicated with the mass air flow sensor, which judged the outside air temperature and moisture levels before sending the information to the car's cold air intake. When communication between the two parts jammed, most frequently caused by a faulty sensor, the engine stalled, dragged, or hesitated.

A few weeks prior, I had been diagnosed with hypothyroidism: a stubborn condition where the thyroid gland is somehow damaged and can no longer communicate effectively with *its* given body. The illness, which resulted in a loss of hormone production, was accompanied by humiliating symptoms, frequent blood tests, and plenty of medication. The lack of hormones had also hosted, among other things, moments of acute memory loss.

It started out as a series of dreams: mornings where I would wake up, unable to recollect the minutes before I had fallen asleep, aware that I had dreamt *something*, but soon met with pigeon-holed confusion and a feeling of loss.

One afternoon, I had plans to meet a friend for lunch. The morning had started out like all the rest: a default iPhone alarm of an antique automobile horn, an aerosol can of dry shampoo, and at least five minutes of anxiety relief recited from a couple of carry-along cards. *I am strong, courageous, and capable. I can share my feelings and thoughts. It always passes.*

Soon, I was behind the wheel of my '98 Oldsmobile Intrigue. White noise hummed through the AM radio signal and spruce trees lined the highway, passing like book pages in the wind. The drive from rural St. Elmo to Charleston was nearly an hour long and stretched out across the flat Illinois landscape. I kept hoping for some type of communication, whether a call or text, to remind me of where I needed to be.

By the time I reached the next rest area, the worry had grown, so I pulled over and searched the car for my cell phone. After thirty minutes combing through seat cushions, I wondered if I hadn't left it on my bed or on the kitchen counter. I paced back and forth, thinking of ways I could contact my mother and find out if I had forgotten it at home. A couple of quarters were lodged between the driver's seat and the center console, so I took them to the payphone near the rest area's entrance.

My fingers shook as I brought each quarter up to the coin slot. The receiver was covered in smiley face stickers and someone had written "Don't worry, be happy" in Sharpie marker across the small white box of directions. After two rings, I heard a click and then a buzz, followed by the familiarity of my mother's voice recording. I placed the

handset back into its slot and walked back to my car, not yet recognizing the strange thyroid fog settling throughout parts of my brain.

I drove home, not once thinking about the friend I had promised to meet.

When I walked through the front door, the unsettling rush of emotion that often accompanies a forgotten responsibility came over me. I found my cell phone—silenced ringer— tucked in my front pocket, along with a series of calls and texts from my mother, as well as the friend: *Where are you? Are you coming? Are you okay?*

Upstairs, I locked myself in my bedroom, only to wake up that evening with my mother beside me and a limited recollection of what had happened earlier that day. I remembered the drive. I remembered the smiley face stickers. I remembered turning the lock. Everything else was dark, like moments when clouds pass by the sun.

The incidents worsened for a while, becoming stronger and more frequent. Miscommunication only led to more problems: increased anxiety, hypertension, isolation. Madison had known something was unusual; whether from the moments I would stop mid-sentence, completely unaware of what I planned to say next, or through nights of conversation with minutes spent stumbling over the simplest of phrases and struggling to push the forgotten thoughts through my mouth. After countless appointments, blood test results, and additional medications, these memories, like the drip-drop of a leaky sink, began to fade into the background of life's hum.

The anxiety was the worst part of all of it. I couldn't drive without imagining all the horrible things that might happen on the road. A blown tire leaving me stranded. A slipping transmission that would finally give out, sending me over the guardrail and down

a steep ditch. Every bump in the road, every bit of wind that whistled through the cabin, solidified my fears. The noises reminded me that something *could* happen, despite how unlikely an accident might be. There were other fears, too, including the financial costs associated with a car wreck. I couldn't afford court, hospital bills, or a new car. It was a never-ending cycle.

I held on to what I remembered—concrete images of childhood, lingering moments of adolescence— hoping these were things the disease could not steal from me. I never regained the years between illness and diagnosis; the empty spaces of stillness and silence; the areas where fog settled over what I had called memories.

***

"I don't know how to explain it," Madison said, proceeding to pepper his drawn-out explanation with enigmatic jargon: combustion chambers, carburetors, crankshafts.

I watched his hands as he dipped a thin white towel into a tub of salve. The translucent goo clung to the cotton and his fingers, and I waited patiently as he polished Josie's chrome rims.

He always saw the best in us, both me and the car. Two weeks after we had finalized the purchase, we found a hidden ash tray in the passenger cabin. The previous owners had stuffed cigarette butts down into the compartment beneath the gear shifter, and for weeks, he pulled them out piece-by-piece. Hours were spent devising concoctions meant to eliminate the smell: homemade treatments, gas station purchases, fragrance bombs. After consulting a couple of professionals, we were told the smell could only be eradicated with time.

A couple of days later, Madison called and said he had a surprise for me. The Hot Rod Power Tour was visiting his hometown and he had bagged us front row seats. The tour, sponsored by *Hot Rod Magazine*, was a giant road trip. Thousands of car enthusiasts readied their rides and took off together, driving across highways and through small towns to show off their vehicles.

Madison found us a parking spot at a neighborhood bank, so we planted ourselves curbside, eager to watch the collector cars roll through the four-way stop across the road. The drivers were friendly, honking their horns and waving limbs out of windows. A 2002 Pontiac Trans Am WS6 Collector's Edition, one of 2,391 cars, drove past, the black and yellow paint scheme foreign against the sky. The driver kept his eyes on the road, hands locked on the steering wheel, but the passenger—a small, elderly woman-—extended the upper half of her body through the convertible top and flung her arms back and forth, blowing kisses at the people who had gathered near the roadside. The way her torso emerged from the car was like the tongue of a frog, stretching itself across a distance measured by the enthusiasm of her greeting. Her Firebird t-shirt matched the logo plastered on the rear windshield of the car.

As the line of cars grew longer, the audience swelled. It was as if each make and model had its own security team. These individuals were so invested in certain vehicles that they would gravitate towards one another within the massive crowds. Madison and I were soon surrounded by their posses: Mustang people who weren't Ford people, diehard Corvette fans, and Mopar guys who were simply overjoyed to see classic Plymouths, Chryslers, and Dodges restored and back on the streets again. For a moment, everything was perfect. The symphony of revving engines, custom horns, and spinning tires had

reached a crescendo. I remembered the stories I had heard about 1930s Detroit. Stories about population spikes and public gardens. Photographs of Henry Ford; each Model-T sold as if it was his own, individually-crafted, yet lined up like ants waiting for a picnic march.

I dug the toes of my shoes into the silt piled around the parking block. The crowds, still growing, swarmed around us until we could no longer see the streets. I knew that if I lost Madison's hand, even for a minute, I couldn't depend on myself to remember the way back to our car. I didn't want the quick exchange of inhale and exhale while I tried to calm my nervous heartbeat. I didn't want to be the one making excuses for a sickness.

***

"It's like breathing," Madison sighed. He was exasperated from explaining the engineering with nothing but unsuccessful metaphors and esoteric jargon. Opening the passenger door, he spritzed the black leather with interior detailer and massaged oil into the seats. I respected the silent frustration in his brow.

From the engine, a soft purr filled the garage. Cotton towel against leather matched the tiny ticks from the metal motor veins. He turned towards me, flashing that same engine sludge smile he always had. Rarely did his frustration last.

I nodded, because despite the barriers between us, I knew exactly the ways in which it was and was not like breathing. I knew every step was necessary: the spinning crankshaft drawing in air, the throat of the timing chain feeding the exhaust, the gaps

amid parts pulsing with power. I knew everything was like breathing; how Madison looked at me, chest drawing up, pausing, and falling in. I knew I made no sense to him.

"It's electricity," he said, reminding me that the distributor forced the fuel to spark. That night, we celebrated, as Josie had just rolled over 200,000 miles. Madison turned toward me, smiling, and laughed: "A quarter mile at a time."

One Ride

1. Tunnel Vision

"Being out on the race track, you got tunnel vision... All you see is what's in front of you. Very seldom do you see what goes on around you."

—Daryl Waltrip, 2001 NASCAR Winston Cup Series, Daytona 500

My father threw paint all day—factory work—and only came back to us when his double-shift ended. It was always dark outside, both morning and night. Tromping through the backdoor, he'd kick his boots off first. Cracked leather. Redwings. Distinguishable by the miniature American flag pin looped through the bottom shoestring. He'd grab a Diet Coke from the refrigerator, knowing the household barred sin: cussing, nudity, sugary drinks. My mother's doing.

When he made it into the living room, he planted himself in the recliner—smooth beige and nearly centered with the 54-inch color television that he'd bought at a garage sale the previous summer and hadn't turned off since. He couldn't miss football, golf, or NASCAR. Especially NASCAR. The familiar whoosh of fast laps and aging announcers trailed into the kitchen as the names of each driver repeated like alphabet drills in my head: Dale Jarrett, Dale Earnhardt, Dale Junior.

The remote, sitting on the arm of his chair, was a snapshot of Sunday afternoons. His rule was simple. If the television remote wasn't placed in a visible location, like the

wicker coffee table, or the chipboard dinner stand next to his recliner, no one would be allowed to leave until *the control* was found. His lips widened with the "troll" of the sound, drawing out the syllables as if he spoke in slow motion. He told us he had never met a family that lost things so often. My mother replied that she had never known a man whose mood hinged on a remote controller. In reply, he would scoop up a Doritos bag, deafening her voice with tortilla chips. The nacho cheese crumbs landed in the rooted mess of hair on his chest.

II. Gentlemen

"Gentlemen, what does it mean to win the single biggest race in NASCAR?"

—2001 NASCAR Winston Cup Series commentary, Daytona 500

"It means he didn't have a daddy," my mother explained. I sat on the edge of my parents' California King and listened to her. She described my father's jealousy towards his sister, and the brokenness that had stemmed from his home. I had just asked her what brokenness meant. She strung words together about a childhood without necessities, and how his father—my grandfather—had only returned when my father's little sister had been born nearly ten years later. "There was no daddy until then. And children need their daddies." I thought about what it meant to need something—to need a father—and how my own father had replaced his affection for me with bimonthly pay stubs and frequent overtime. He missed out on birthday dinners, movie nights, and little league games, always apologizing: "If I didn't work, you wouldn't get presents." I somehow felt worse.

When he was a child, he couldn't stop working. After baseball games, he would repair roofs and wire electric. In a neighborhood of families living well below the poverty level, he didn't need certification. Instead, he'd be on his bicycle the next morning, delivering newspapers and collecting coins for groceries that his own father hadn't bought.

On first base and at first down, he returned to boyhood, scanning the bleachers and praying for his father to show up in the crowd. A father that pulled himself away from the broken lawnmower, or the empty car lot, and relieved his son of the responsibility of being a man; of caring for his mother and two siblings, and hiding food in dresser drawers to fill his stomach when the pantry ran thin.

III. Decisions

> "People don't realize you have a millisecond to make that decision. Sometimes it's right. Sometimes it's wrong."
>
> —2001 NASCAR Winston Cup Series commentary, Daytona 500

The girls in sixth grade gym told me I had daddy issues.

We tossed around miniature deodorants and smacked on Dubble Bubble gum, listening to Danielle describe seeing her older brother masturbate through a small slit in the wooden paneling of his bedroom walls. Kelsie overheard her grandparents discuss cutting their daughter off.

That past week, I had learned of divorce: a separation of things that were or ought to be connected. I used the word when my gym teacher split us into groups. I used it again when my father grabbed his muzzleloader and fired at the geese on our lawn. He hadn't noticed that the birds had moved before he had even approached the patio door. His footsteps had given him away—loud and heavy—and like train cars, geese stretched out across the edge of the pond, as if the water protected them.

My father stood on the edge of the porch. He propped himself up on the wooden post wedged on the far corner and aimed his gun at the flock closest to the yard. He had once promised me that he would never kill anything we couldn't eat, and for years, I watched the geese fly above the lake, moving between their sharp-angled v-formations knowing they were safe. I wasn't so sure anymore.

When he pulled the trigger, the birds flew off into different directions. Each one was followed by the echo of the shot.

On the locker room bench, Danielle braided my hair and reminded me that girls needed their fathers. She had almost lost hers to the babysitter. We both shrugged.

After school, my father would sit in front of the television, snoring through reruns of long-finished races. I wanted to wake him and ask how the pit crew could change a tire so fast, the whir of the impact fresh through the television's speakers. I knew he had just gotten home from work, though. A long day spent on concrete floors dodging forklifts and heavy pallets. On weekends and school holidays, we used to spend the noon hour together. My mother would pick up the phone connected to the security office, granting us clearance into the parking lot. She held my hand on one side, and sack lunches on the

other. His favorite: pastrami and pepper jack sandwiches. On a picnic table near the backdoor, we crunched apple slices and hogged down chips. He wanted to come home, but his shifts were never over.

IV. Friction

> "These restrictor plate engines—they build them with light parts—light rods, light pistons, small bearings. Friction is a big enemy of a restrictor plate engine."
>
> —2001 NASCAR Winston Cup Series commentary, Daytona 500

I was eight years old, and it was during the 2001 Daytona 500 Winston Cup Series, when Pontiac still had a few runs left. I did everything I could to distract myself from the TV.

I understood that the race was a big deal. New television contracts with Fox, FX, NBC, and Turner had totaled $2.4 billion dollars, and Dodge returned to the races after a 25-year hiatus. I heard the announcers refer to it as "the most anticipated race of the year," and my father echoed with "and of NASCAR."

I sketched pictures of monsters near his recliner—women with headlight eyes, big tire legs, and antenna hair. A vampire driver with pointy canines, just like my dad's.

Every time I laughed, he glanced down with a dirty look. Talking was only permitted during commercials. I pretended like I didn't notice him, though. Even when his nostrils flared, or he balled his fists because Jarrett fell into seventh place.

I wasn't afraid of him in these moments. I knew how far I could poke and prod until he would erupt and the real monster would come out. I wanted to see it: his bulging eyes, paddle-palm, and raging tongue. I needed his attention.

When he asked why I was laughing, I clinched my lips tight.

"Omitting pieces of the truth is just like lying," he said. I hurt my father's feelings when I told him that his teeth looked like Dracula's.

V. Big Picture

"You gotta look at the big picture. This is-a one race for the whole year."

—2001 NASCAR Winston Cup Series commentary, Daytona 500

Snapshots: Wood ripped from hinges. Glass beneath feet. Foam plate thrown. Foam plate thrown again. Mom scrubbed ketchup off the carpet, the one-two of her breaths ticking like a serpentine belt. Outside, his '93 Silverado disappeared down the lane.

I held my brother in my arms near the top of the staircase. "Our birthdays are too close," I told him. "They can't split us apart." Between wet, raspy breaths, he asked me if our parents were breaking up. I pushed his hair back—a quiet reassurance—and told him the four of us would always be together. He responded: "But I only want to live with Mommy."

Later that night, our mother popped three TV dinners into the oven. Landon ate his brownie first, and the chocolate goop clung to his front teeth, creating the illusion of a

two-tooth gap. We laughed until our sides hurt, forgetting to listen for my father: the opening of the garage door, the soft stomp of steel-toed boots, a stubborn apology from the man that rarely laughed with us.

I can't remember if he came home that night. Maybe because it didn't matter. Maybe because he would do what he would always do: watch the races, explain driver teams, and remind us to hold our thoughts until the commercial breaks.

VI. FIGHT SO HARD

"Why do these guys fight so hard to lead a lap?"

—2001 NASCAR Winston Cup Series commentary, Daytona 500

Christmas morning, 2000: My mother opened a ring box and found a piece of folded paper. The directions instructed her to unfold the note and figure out the surprise. She followed each line, quick to end on four words that meant more than jewelry. *I got the job.* Across the room, my father smiled, and my mother, speechless, threw herself into his arms. A promotion. No more holidays and weekends. Annual shift changes. He needed new clothes—brightly-colored polos and cargo khakis—because "shift manager" meant he had been saved from the factory floor. He was in charge now. There were Christmas parties, and business trips, and more time for television. An increase in pay and an upgraded cable package. Even DVR.

2001: "Did you see that?" my father mouthed, rewinding the crash. "Earnhardt brought that one on himself." The instant playback wasn't clear.

It was the final lap of the Daytona 500, and cameras were positioned on the leader, Michael Waltrip, and what would be his first win after 463 races. From the announcer booth, Darrell Waltrip, Michael's older brother, cried. His voice was caught between cheers and shouts of "Mikey," and before the camera cut away, he smiled and said, "This is a dream come true."

Outside the television's frame, the #3 Goodwrench car smoked from the grassy median. Footage floated between the wreckage— Ken Schrader's #36 car, bright yellow with M&M candy decals, resting next to Dale's—and Victory Lane, where Michael Waltrip's wife was lifted onto someone's shoulders, and she cheered for her husband's nearly impossible victory. Fox soon cut to commercial.

When the race came back on, Dale's car was surrounded by five emergency vehicles. His son, Dale Earnhardt, Jr., watched from behind the car. While medical personnel cut Dale from his seat, Michael Waltrip enjoyed a coke as confetti fell around him. "Thank God and thank my dad," he said in an interview following the race. "If my dad was here, it'd be complete."

The wreck was replayed several times, with announcers commenting that television was unable to capture the full impact of the crash. We left the channel on and waited for news regarding Dale's condition. At 7 o'clock, NASCAR president Mike Helton announced Dale's death: "We've lost Dale Earnhardt."

VII. LEADING

"It doesn't matter who's leading. We've still got a 43-car lead."

—2001 NASCAR Winston Cup Series commentary, Daytona 500

My father should have died a long time ago. All the evidence concluded that his life was a series of unnecessary risks. Weeks between overtime, he would crash on the couch. Strip off his clothes—paint-splattered blue jeans and braided leather belt—and wrap himself in a matted Green Bay Packers blanket hoarded from his own adolescence. For once, he was silent. No snoring, no shouting. Just sleep. "A reaction," my mother explained. "His sugar is low." She used his diabetes as an excuse for everything.

One evening, his sugar dipped too low. He woke up disoriented, cursing at the baby crying on the floor next to the couch. It was my brother, and he didn't recognize him. "Shut that damn thing up," he shouted. Landon's crying surged. He didn't know my father either—not like this—and his wails got louder. I heard my mother drop a pan in the kitchen. Soon, she rushed into the living room.

"Run," she told me. "Across the street. Get Deb and tell her Daddy's sugar is too low." I did as she said, looking both ways, crossing the street, and banging on the neighbor's door. Deb was a nurse, and she had helped us before.

When she answered the door, I hardly had to explain myself. I mouthed "reaction" and she grabbed her bag, urging me to follow her across the street. I stood back when she rolled my father off the couch and onto the floor, pricking his finger with a lancet, and tucking the testing strip into the glucose machine. She pulled out a Snickers bar and tore it into pieces, cramming the tiny bites down his throat.

From the corner, I played out different scenarios in my mind. Never seeing his beat-up Chevy. Sunday afternoons without dinner after church. We always went to China Buffet, and he had taught me how to use chopsticks before I was able to drink from a regular glass. As soon as we walked in, he grabbed the red packet of wooden sticks from behind the counter and placed them between my fingers, "just like holding a pen," and watched as I struggled to pick up small pieces of coconut chicken and peppered beef. His laugh was strong and wet, like it was coming straight from his nose, and he covered the restaurant with the sound as I flung soy sauce across the table. He was never in a bad mood when his belly was full of hot and sour soup.

While he was on the living room floor, the insulin flooded his veins. He woke up in the hospital with that same wet laugh, asking the nurses why he had peanuts in his teeth. He knew us—my mother, brother, and myself—and apologized for his body and its brokenness, for the time he spent away from home, and promised not to jeopardize his health over a job.

My father always came home. Kneeled, ripe in his cut-off t-shirt from last year's church softball league, and looked at his only daughter: scabby knees, mess of curls, grape-stained popsicle lips. Sweat gathered within the space between his eyebrows and he motor-mouthed about his twin brother and juvenile diabetes and the totaled '68 Mustang he drove into a ditch south of our house nearly twenty years ago.

"When his dad came back," my mother told me, "his sister got all the attention. That's why he acted out."

I asked her what that had to do with me.

VIII. Wide Open

"Look at the throttle right here. You see, the key to getting around here is going wide open."

—2001 NASCAR Winston Cup Series commentary, Daytona 500

After the promotion, paid holiday meant helping my grandfather farm during planting and harvest. As I got older, I complained about the absence of family vacations. We moved to my grandfather's land and built a log cabin. Money was spent maintaining the yard, buying tractors, and building fencing. Crop prices fluctuated, but my father held on. We needed the insurance and the benefits. He never stopped working.

I had a job, too: helping my mother prepare meals, drive grain trucks, and feed the animals. We'd spend all afternoon prepping buttery roasts and cutting homemade French fries, creating an assembly line once it was time to pack the dinners.

"Fork." She'd hold out her hand and motion for the utensil, and I'd pass it her way. Prepping was tedious work. Several of our employees were picky, so it was up to me to make sure Glen didn't get cheese on his hamburgers, and that Sandra was given hot dogs instead of bratwurst. My father had special orders, too, requesting that all his condiments were placed on his food prior to delivery.

Despite the hassle, being a farmhand was a welcome break from the diner where I had been waitressing throughout the week. When field demands heightened, I skipped shifts to help my parents out. My father stretched his vacation as well, using sick and personal days to make up for the time my grandfather was too ill to climb into the equipment. By 2011, my father quit his job, and my parents became the sole owners and operators of our fifth-generation farm. Within weeks, everything had changed. I hadn't spent more than a day or two with my father in years, but we were soon clocking stretches of quality time spent together. I rode shotgun in the combine, and accompanied him on fishing trips. His anger dissipated. He gave hugs. He smiled.

My mom claimed it was a spiritual act. Years of unanswered prayers and a divine intervention from Jesus himself. I didn't know what to think, but I recognized changes throughout the house: a full refrigerator, high thread-count sheets, a new lawnmower parked in the garage.

IX. Holy Ground

> "There's no greater feeling, no greater accomplishment, than driving your car though those pearly gates into that holy ground."
>
> —Daryl Waltrip, 2001 NASCAR Winston Cup Series, Daytona 500

My parents have been married for twenty-four years, and on their most recent anniversary, my father spent all day in the fields. It was harvest season. When he walked through the door that night, he collapsed in his favorite recliner. It wasn't the same chair

from my childhood. He's now upgraded: suede with electric controls, and a leather-coated footrest. My mother's recliner is nearly adjacent to his own, separated by an end table filled with sour candy and miscellaneous remotes. We don't lose the controller anymore either.

Within minutes, he had fallen asleep, and from her chair, my mother watched, palm tucked under her chin, and listened to his breathing. She removed his shoes—another pair of dusty Redwings with that same American flag pin clipped to the shoelaces—and I realized then that my father had no plans of ever changing.

**Note: 2001 Daytona 500. Announcers include Mike Joy, Darrell Waltip, Larry McReynolds, Dick Berggren, Steve Byrnes, Matt Yocum, and Jeanne Zelasko.*

How to Girl

Three days after Carly's slumber party, my mom found a chunk of lipstick in my left nostril. The night of the slumber party, a group of girls giggled over the *Grease* soundtrack. I had never watched the film, but I laughed anyway—something about my made-up credentials as the pop culture queen of kindergarten, or maybe because I didn't want to be made fun of like the girls who never got invited. Either way, I snickered along.

Many of the girls claimed the words as their own. Their lips flapped with each whiney syllable, condemning poor Sandy for her lousy virginity and irrational fear of Elvis's hips. I'm not sure if they knew what virginity was, but I wasn't going to ask because I didn't know either. The week prior to the party, Carly had called the teacher a "four-eyed fatty" and was sent to the office. She was dangerous—a kindergarten renegade—and I had no plans of getting on her bad side. I hardly knew what any of the phrases meant, so I scanned the room for signs of equal confusion; perhaps another six-year old fidgeting in her seat and fumbling over the lyrics, or even one like me who had been avoiding direct eye contact the past fifteen minutes. At the time, I wanted to believe I wasn't alone, hopeful someone else didn't understand the song either.

Once the sun tucked itself in and slipped into a bed of cornfields and muddy rivers hidden along the skyline, Carly dug through a wooden trunk. Shades of purple and

pink satin slid across her fumbling fingers as she handed out each dress, the fabric covering each girl's shoulders, tummy, and toes. I stood in the corner of the room; silent, anxious someone would soon realize I hadn't been participating. I was nauseated at the idea of explaining why I always chose the sidelines. It wasn't just the trunk of dresses that bothered me. I knew that soon, each dress would be assigned, and I would be standing there alone in a scrap of fabric. Something about the dress itself disgusted me.

But my repulsion regarding the dress wasn't anything new to me. As a child, I was often entertained by things most girls turned their noses toward. A few days prior to the party, I had taken a trip to my family's farm, coating my overalls and cheap jellybean sandals in dirt. Creeping behind one of the machine sheds, I ran towards the row of grain bins, eager to see the fields from a higher view. One foot after another, I clung to the bottom rung of the metal ladder and hugged the side rails. A safety cage was waiting nearly ten feet up, but I didn't need it. I knew exactly what I was doing, and I was convinced I didn't need anyone there to catch me.

My feet moved much slower than my heartbeat. I tried my best to ease up the ladder, but from across the yard, I heard the familiar firing of our 1976 Ford F350 custom dump truck. The sound could only have meant one thing—that my grandfather was nearly finished with his work, and soon we could dump the trash and then take the truck out to Lake Polly for an evening of fishing. There was something noble about playing outside, at least for me. I never wanted to be trapped in a basement with a bunch of girls romping around in bright colors with fancy up-dos and hand-me-down heels. I watched Carly as she pulled out the last piece of fabric from the trunk. She squealed with excitement.

"And the Cinderella dress is for me!"

She ducked behind a pink felt partition in the corner of her bedroom and soon waltzed out in light blue: sequenced trim, crystal brooch, pearl-capped sleeves. She stomped around, both hands on her hips, and demanded everyone change into their dresses and follow her down the hallway. Locking hands with two other girls, she twirled and modeled the prepubescent ball gown. Her eyes caught mine, and I knew it was only a matter of time until I would be forced to join them.

Carly and I rarely got along. Her face was framed with crimson pigtails, freckled cheeks, and just the right amount of sass to drive everyone crazy. She was the kind of girl who cried during naptime and refused to share her toys with the rest of the class. I was *different*, or at least that's what she had told me.

"Why do you spend so much time outside?" she asked, holding two dolls, a princess and a knight, and forcing them to walk up the steps of a plastic castle set up in the back of our kindergarten classroom. I tried to explain to her that I had my own castle—a bigger castle—and it just happened to be outside.

"That doesn't make sense," she snorted. "A shed is *not* a castle."

I did have my own castle: a shed close to the road on the property where my grandfather stored his farm equipment. The building served as a repair garage, gas station, and butcher shop. Three huge tanks sat near its entrance, filled with various concoctions of farm diesel and ethanol gasoline. Inside the front door, a workbench was tucked away with at least four toolboxes and cabinets filled with aftermarket truck and tractor parts. The oldest farming equipment I'd ever seen swung from the rafters—antique plows, steel spades, ox yolks—all hung by rusty wire and butcher hooks across

the ceiling. A giant metal smiley face sign peeked out from above the doors, right next to a series of pulleys, levers, and chains that dropped from the wooden beams. During hunting season, my dad spent hours in the shed trimming deer carcasses. He would drop the chain, tie the back legs up, and hoist the body high enough for a five-gallon bucket to fit comfortably beneath the animal. With a tight wrist, he would cut a slit through the deer's throat, and we would both watched as the heart pumped blood into the bucket.

"My castle is dangerous," I told her. I spent most of my evenings there, pulling up another bucket, flipping it over, and sitting cross-legged watching my father cut into muscle. Behind him, an entire army of equipment sat silent: a couple of old Farmalls with at least one working torque amplifier, a brand new CaseIH combine with an attached corn head, a firing squad of grain trucks in shades of red, green, and white, all with our signature *Ragel Farms | Loogootee, Illinois* sticker on the driver-side doors. But Carly never believed me when I spoke about my guards.

Despite any effort I had spent to fit in, I never wanted to end up in Carly's bedroom, and especially not for a Saturday night slumber party. My parents didn't trust me to hang out with anyone else though.

"We know it's not fair," my mom explained. "But some kids don't have the same…" she paused. "…opportunities. It's not safe to go other places." At the time, I didn't understand what she meant.

It only took Carly a few minutes to realize I hadn't put on my dress. She sent her two henchwomen, Hailey and Lauren, one of them with a pale thin-strapped dress draped across her arm. The two girls instructed me to lift my arms and each hand grabbed a hem,

yanking my t-shirt off and jerking the yellow fabric over my shoulders and past my belly button.

"Do you have a bigger dress?" Lauren asked. Carly was too preoccupied with her own reflection to answer. Lauren's blonde bob smacked me in the face more than once and when she leaned in, I could smell cotton candy on her breath. Her lips were doused in the lightest shade of pink—lipstick, maybe? I had never touched a cosmetic and I startled Lauren when I reached out and grazed her lower lip with my finger.

"What a freak," Carly mumbled from across the room. I knew it was directed toward me.

I thought of my mother, and how every morning she would stand in front of her own mirror, carefully applying layers of pale pink primer and mulberry lip liner. She filled the empty spaces with a tube of matching L'Oréal lipstick, painting her face as if it were a page from a coloring book.

I didn't look like her, and I certainly didn't look like them.

One of my first pictures as a child was taken inside the tire of my grandfather's CaseIH STX440. I am propped up in a sea-foam green two-piece sweater set, a small grin spread between my ears. This picture was just the first of many to come, all featuring a curly blonde-headed mess in full orneriness on the farm: playing tag in the six-foot corn fields, jumping up and down on a bed of seed bags in the back of the Ford dump truck, driving a four-wheeler up a tree after my grandfather had told me I could mow down saplings that stood in my way. These photographs were printed and hung in the shed windows, on dash clusters between the speedometer and tachometer, and on my grandfather's bathroom mirror.

I thought about these moments as I struggled to wrap the thin-strapped dress around my shoulders. It was two sizes too small, but my pride wouldn't let me check the trunk for an alternative. My arms bulged out, skin surrounding the slick spaghetti straps. Just last week, my gym coach had complimented my five-second handstand. She squeezed my baby biceps and reminded me to keep up the good work. I beamed with accomplishment and spent the next three days practicing on a foam mat in the backyard, hoisting myself up into a perfect position—straight legs, tight butt, solid arms. None of that work mattered now. As the fabric tightened across my skin, I regretted every second I had outside. I spat under my breath, promising myself I'd never do a handstand again.

With Lauren and Hailey's help, I finally squeezed into the dress. The fabric bunched up around my hips, constricting my stomach and falling right above my knees. A disaster in a dress. Carly marched up to me, the Cinderella dress sashaying with each dramatic footstep. She took one look, tracing her eyes up and down my body, and crossed her arms in disgust. Clearing her throat, her squeaky voice rang clear.

"You're not very good at being a girl, are you?" My scabby knees, peach fuzz tummy, and fading Tigger tattoo had answered her question before I could even open my mouth.

I haven't spoken to Carly in years, but I'm still not very good at being a girl. Just last week, I spent an entire afternoon clearing out the manure in one of the pastures. As I scooped the piles of poop into the wheel barrow, I felt my pigs' wet, silty kisses on the backs of my knees. For every load I emptied, their noses pushed harder, nearly knocking me over before I sat on a stump and gave them both belly rubs. My legs were coated in shit and pig spit, and I wiped my forehead with the bottom of my t-shirt. Even with

enough dirt under my nails to start an earthworm farm, my pigs didn't care. Their joyful snorts were a simple affirmation: I only needed to be good at being myself.

When Knowing Isn't Enough

If any American model of car sells itself purely on exclusivity, it's the Corvette. I occasionally like to mention in conversations that my fiancé and I were the proud owners of one for two months. When I mention it was an '84 C4, most people nod and change the subject.

Madison and I picked the car up cheap on trade from his step-father's dealership. The car was worn and red with leather seat covers and the dashboard featured GM's new digital liquid crystal display dash in shades of blues and greens. The liquid crystal was smashed against the plastic and the bubbles of colored goo created mosaics throughout the panels. Despite this flaw, the dashboard was still the prettiest part of the car.

It was a failed model—the 1984 cross-injected engine disasters that left General Motors scrambling to pick up the pieces after a nasty emissions battle—and despite the grandiose of the Corvette name, our purchase fell apart faster than the throttle. In 1970, the United States Congress passed the first Clean Air Act, which required a whopping 90-percent reduction in emissions for new automobiles by 1975. The results were catastrophic. Unable to meet the deadlines set forth by the United States government, Chrysler, Ford, and Chevrolet scrambled to create cleaner, more efficient engines. The

term "catalytic converter" became a nationwide term, prompting the automobile industry to slap one on nearly every car coming out of production without having much time to work out the kinks. Lawsuits ran rampant. The "Big Three" couldn't keep up, suing the government for their refusal to extend the deadlines, eventually winning both an extended deadline for the emissions reduction, as well as the inclusion of the catalytic convertor on all standard vehicles. Despite their legal win, Detroit crumbled. Smaller Japanese and European cars already met the new regulations, increasing sales across the county. Congress established the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), who mandated a nationwide speed limit of 55-miles-per-hour. By 1984, Chevrolet still hadn't caught up. Our speedometer was permanently stuck at 72-miles-per-hour of mock fury and despite a supposed top speed of 142, our engine struggled to keep up with the other cars on the highway.

The original stained-glass mimicry tachometer had also been replaced with an updated aftermarket tach; one that clutched the side of the door between the frame of the windshield and side glass, connecting to a power source within the firewall. Underneath the dash, a switch had been installed, its sole purpose to redirect the energy from the firewall to the electronic tachometer. Madison often joked that the original tachometer that been nothing more than a dashboard decoration. We later learned that Chevrolet had reported numerous problems with the instrument clusters on the mid-eighties Corvettes. The LED lights often went dark or stopped responding to the car's computer system. Many users also reported electric issues that caused the dash lights to flicker or move without any throttle response.

I should have protested the purchase of the car, but Madison is so frugal that when he comes to me asking advice about a potential purchase, I almost always give him a positive reaction. *I know how much you've wanted something like this.* It's like a silent agreement between us. *And it's a four-speed. Do you know how much fun we could have with a four-speed?* It's not my place to deny him of such pleasure, but if I'm being honest, my encouragement wasn't entirely selfless; I wanted to drive the car, too.

The first day, we replaced the spark plugs and ignition wires. The engine had been misfiring on start-up, but three hours and sixty dollars later, she was back on the road—or at least that's what we though. By day three, the car still wasn't acting right, so after a weekend spent testing the engine, we realized the problem wasn't just a lack of maintenance; the distributor cap and ignition coil needed replaced, too. With a grin, Madison bought the parts, and we spent a few more hours patching up the motor.

By day five, the vehicle no longer had a heating system. We spent another forty dollars on the necessary parts, including a C4 heater core and a couple of dash clips. For the entire day, Madison and I watched YouTube tutorials on the part replacement, and after working up enough courage to dive right in, Madison ripped out the lower half of the dash beneath the car's steering wheel and switched out the cores. While he worked, I watched his face—tight brow, smile lines, an aura of frustration—and caught myself laughing when he pulled his bloody hand out from underneath the dash.

On the eighth day, Madison drove the car to class. His commute was roughly an hour, and by the time he reached campus, he needed a couple of painkillers to numb the headache caused by the car's faulty suspension. The rough ride didn't stop us from meeting after class and riding through town, though.

During that particular semester, there was always a campus police officer parked off of Ninth Street. She positioned herself between two lamp posts, parking the car at an angle adjacent to the road and hiding from the incoming traffic. Returning to my apartment after lunch, my gut dropped with the whirring cherries-and-berries in the rearview. Madison mumbled under his breath and pulled the car over into the nearest parking lot.

The police officer took her time getting to the window, but was quick to ask for identification and the necessary insurance documents.

"Do you know why I pulled you over?" she asked. Madison shook his head.

"Absolutely no idea." She laughed and raised her eyes toward the sky.

"There's a storm coming. It's a little dark outside and you snuck right up on me." Madison and I exchanged a glance.

"It's three o'clock in the afternoon," Madison responded. She glanced at her car, then back at us.

"Keep your lights on." She handed back the glovebox papers and walked back toward her squad car.

"What was that about?" Madison asked. I had no idea, but I blamed the Corvette.

One week and two days in, Madison thought it would be a good idea to test drive the car near my parents' house. Despite the rugged roads—if the dirt path pothole strips of land could even be called roads—he was convinced that I would master the clutch by running the gears through a series of twists and turns into the wooded area that surrounded their log cabin. I never had a problem shifting; my grandfather made sure of

that. I had spent hours learning how to drive stick shift with him as a child. The tachometer in his '76 Ford F-350 had stopped working years before I sat in the driver's seat, so I was attuned to the various noises a manual transmission would make when it needed to be shifted into the next gear. It was a low flatline—a rough monotone howl of an overworked and confused engine—so I waited, palm grasping the shifter knob, just waiting for the precise moment to drag into second.

"Nice one," my grandfather would smile. He didn't seem nearly as scared as I was, and I often overheard him telling my mother that he would ride with me anywhere. I had always been praised for my driving; even after a near-death car accident as a teenager, or the numerous tickets I earned by speeding or blowing through stop signs. My grandfather was proud, and that's all I needed to hear. It's unfortunate that downshifting isn't as simple.

Madison has tirelessly tried to convince me that my fear of the downshift is irrational, and that I just need more practice. I've promised him that practice doesn't prevent me from dropping the transmission down a hill when I forget I'm in fourth gear, or attempting to accelerate in sixth at a green light. I'm not sure if it's my routine forgetfulness or perhaps the hypothyroidism brain fog that fuels my inability to remember, but whatever the cause, it far outweighs my interest in practical manual transmissions practice.

The roads started off easy enough: a simple climb, one-two shift, pushing in the clutch and riding out the hill. I could manage all of that. Five miles later, we hit seventy on a dirt road. Madison kept pushing me to drive faster with the promise that downshifting was easier when there was more space to slow down. My toes barely

reached the clutch pedal. Hands clinched, one around the steering wheel and the other on the shifter knob, I listened as the car slowed itself down.

"That's it," Madison said. "You've got it." I slid the gear into third, and in a few yards, into second. Madison pointed at the stop sign up ahead. I rolled through the marker at the same speed and opened the throttle once again.

The next morning, Madison re-ran all of the vacuum lines beneath the hood. The Corvette idled at nearly 2.5 thousand RPMS, which meant something wasn't quite right.

"You'd think they'd make vehicles that could actually be fixed," he remarked. We had both accepted that the car was a lemon: an unfortunate label that we avoided at all costs. After another stifling parts bill, we knew it was time to sell the car.

A couple of days before listing it, I visited Rick Treworgy's Muscle Car City in Punta Gorda, Florida. Rick's collection boasts over 200 antique and vintage General Motors muscle cars—a wet dream for all gearheads—and the trip was one of my top priorities during my stay on the Gulf Coast. After a little persuasion, I convinced my brother, father, and grandfather to tag along, too.

Once we had paid for our tickets, I immediately caught sight of a 1970 Chevelle SS. The LS-5 engine stationed in the engine bay reflected off the top of the hood. Within seconds, I was mesmerized.

I made my way through the rows of cars: '69 Pontiac GTO, '70 Oldsmobile 442, '71 Chevrolet Camaro SS. The cars stood out with fresh paint and smooth wax, all restored to their original factory pristine. I couldn't choose a favorite; they were all worthy.

Nearly an hour later, I realized I had lost track of my family. I scanned the building, which was once a Walmart superstore, and looked for three familiar shapes in the distance. Across one of the smaller walkways, I saw them talking to two other men dressed in matching Muscle Car City uniforms. One held a bottle of spray wax, and the other flipped through his phone and showed my father pictures of one of his project cars. I joined the circle mid-conversation. The employee with the cell phone, who seemed disinterested in our conversation, grabbed another bottle of wax and went to work on the row of Chevelles down the walkway. The man with the cell phone continued talking.

"Yeah, we had a problem a few months ago with my daughter and her boyfriend. He bought her a new car for her college graduation, but she broke up with him three days later."

"What kind of car was it?" my grandfather asked.

"Oh, some project Mustang. She loved it, but my wife told her she couldn't keep it. It was a pretty nice lookin' car." He mumbled on about the car for a few minutes before he started talking about the 1963 Split-Window Corvette in the middle of the showroom floor. The man kept referring to it as "Split Personality," highlighting the giant metal rod that comes up from the hatch and connects to the hood. As a result, the rear window is split into two separate pieces.

I know a lot about the split-window Corvettes, not because I necessarily like it, but because the car taunts automobile enthusiasts with a certain elusivity that only accompanies a single year of Chevrolet manufacturing. The car was discontinued at the end of '63 after numerous complaints regarding the rear visibility of the vehicle. It was the classic argument of style versus efficiency, and in this case, even safety. Chevrolet

made the final decision after labor and part costs had doubled for the construction and installation of two rear windshields per car.

When I mentioned this to the man, he turned toward my dad and replied to my statement.

"There were just issues with the design overall. It just wasn't practical for the company to keep making them."

I asked him about the engine—an LS3-3 Cammer with nearly 500 horsepower—and he nodded his head, once again looking at my father, and responded: "Yeah, that's a lot of horsepower."

This method of question-and-answer continued for nearly thirty minutes. We discussed the different cars featured throughout the walkways, and each time I would speak up or ask a question, I was met with a blank stare and a cheek turned left, my response fielded through whatever my family came up with as a response.

My dad must have picked up on it, too, because after a half-hour of watching me being talked around, he motioned to himself, my brother, and my grandfather and said to the man, "To be honest, I'm not sure what you're talking about. The only reason we're here is because of my daughter. She's the one obsessed with this stuff."

For the first time that day, the man and I made eye contact.

"You like all this stuff? Well, why didn't you say anything?" He playfully nudged my shoulder blade and let out a deep laugh. I could feel a cringe slipping through my smile.

I don't think the man meant to be rude, or sexist, or derogatory, or at least that's what I tell myself. I might have believed it if it had been the only time I had been reduced

to background noise in a conversation about cars. But it wasn't. The moment existed in a long-standing thread of similar memories where I felt ignored, or even worse, brainless.

Just last year, an oil change technician tried to swindle me out of a hundred dollars when he claimed I needed a radiator flush before my engine seized up. I had driven Josie, my '99 Pontiac Firebird, three-and-a-half hours north to a friend's house for the weekend. I usually change my own oil. It's cheaper, and I never have to deal with the impact-tightened oil filter aftermath that accompanies a speed lube stop. But I wanted to reward Josie for her cross-state trek, and didn't necessarily trust her to get me home with the same old oil.

The stop began like any another: pulling up to a transparent garage door, waiting for a man in a one-piece Dickies suit to direct me onto the oil bay, stepping out of the car and handing over the keys, waiting on pleather chairs with a week-old pot of coffee to the left and a 1970s vending machine full of Three Musketeers bars to the right. Twenty minutes past and the man in the suit pushed through the glass door and into the waiting area.

"Ma'am, there seems to be a problem with your car." I turned toward him, raising my eyebrows and waiting for further explanation. "We found oil on the underside of the coolant cap. It was all gunked up, and we think the coolant might be leaking into your engine." I continued to stare. "We've never seen anything quite like it. I recommend a complete flush of the coolant system so we can clear all that oil out. You don't want your engine to freeze up."

"Can I go take a look?" I could tell the question caught the man off guard. He took a step back, glanced around the room, and nodded.

"Yeah, I'll show you what's going on." We walked into the garage. I noticed several men standing near Josie's engine bay and held my laughter. Each of them stood in a similar way, one foot forward with their hands on their hips, all leaning in the direction of the car.

"We doing that flush?" one of the men asked aloud. The guy I had been speaking with shook his head.

"She wants to see the car." The other men backed up and made room for us. "Here's the cap."

He handed me the plastic lid and the first thing I noticed was, in fact, the dark gel that had gathered around the seal. I started laughing, and the man wrinkled his forehead.

"It's not oil," I told him, grabbing a paper towel off the center rack and wiping the cap clean. It was some leftover stop leak Madison had emptied into the reservoir a couple of months ago. The radiator had been dripping some antifreeze, not into the engine, but onto the ground, so rather than replace the lines, we chose the cheap route: a bottle of Bar's Leaks Radiator Stop Leak.

"What do you mean it's not oil?" the man asked. "Look at it."

"I am. And I know it's not oil. The coolant has an additive." The man shook his head. "We put stop leak in it awhile back."

"Are you sure it's stop leak? Because when we started the car, it sounded a little funny. Like something wasn't firing right. I really think some of that coolant got into the engine." I tried my best not to roll my eyes.

"I know my car. If there's a leak, a radiator flush won't even do anything. It's just going to dump more coolant into the engine." The man took a deep breath and scanned

the garage. The rest of the men had went back inside, and it was just the two of us standing next to my car.

"Listen," he paused, drawing another breath and pulling his hands from his pockets. "I really don't want you leaving here without getting that radiator flushed. The engine's going to seize up going down the road."

"Can I make a phone call?" He nodded and I stepped away from the bay. I knew if anyone could get me out of this garage, it would be Madison. I dialed his number and waited for his voice on the line.

He picked up after two rings, and when I explained the situation, the first thing he did was let me know how annoyed he was that I took the car someplace other than our own garage.

"You know how persistent those guys can be," he said. "Josie would have been fine." I told him now wasn't the time to rethink past decisions. He agreed and told me to put him on speakerphone.

"So you think there's an oil leak somewhere?" His voice echoed through the garage.

"Well, I mean, there was some oil residue on the coolant cap. Nothing that can't be fixed with a radiator flush. We'll clean out the lines and get the car running good as new."

Madison laughed. "If coolant's leaking into the engine, a radiator flush won't do shit. It's already done screwed. Let her go. She's got two more cars at home."

The man looked at me, and I shrugged my shoulders. "I told you it wouldn't do anything." Madison clicked off and the phone went dark. "Can I go now?" The man blew

hot air and motioned for me to follow him into the office. He wrote up a receipt for the oil change and I paid him with my credit card. I wanted the option to dispute if he overcharged me. We soon parted ways.

Josie didn't leak oil, and her engine never seized up. When I eventually sold her, she was still running sans mass air flow sensor. I'm convinced that her 3800 series motor will run forever.

Being immersed in a culture obsessed with masculinity often results in confronting the very ideals many members struggle to recognize, let alone understand. Muscle Car City wasn't the first time I've experienced a shut-out from men who are not used to a woman's influence in the automotive industry. The speed lube incident wasn't the last time I'll be met with persistence against my own knowledge at a car care center. Even with strides that have been made-—GM's head CEO is now a woman—there are moments where I feel out of place as a woman participating in a conversation about cars.

I acknowledge that I'm luckier than most. I grew up with grandfathers and a father did their best to welcome me into their exclusive worlds. I've also found similar comforts within my relationship with Madison. He no longer spares me from the difficult descriptions or explanations that accompany the automotive culture. But despite their willingness to teach and demonstrate without reserve, I am still stuck. In male-dominated industries, there is a place where knowledge simply isn't enough.

There is a brilliant scene in *Fast & Furious: Tokyo Drift* that reminds me of the interactions I often encounter with men in the industry. Sean Boswell, a small town trouble maker with a semi-sweet Alabama accent, pulls his piece-of-shit 1971 Chevrolet Monte Carlo into the school parking lot next to his classmate Clay's 2006 Dodge Viper

SRT-10. Clay's girlfriend Cindy is in the passenger seat, her sandaled feet propped up on the dashboard. Sean walks past her to get to his car when she makes a comment about the condition of the Monte Carlo. Sean lets her know that it "does the job" before turning away.

Unfortunately, he doesn't turn away soon enough. Clay—who I might add is a meathead—walks up to Sean and accuses him of hitting up his "girl," all while ensuring him that his "grandma's Buick [could] smoke that piece of trailer trash," a reference to Sean's Monte Carlo. Sean, quick on his wit, snaps back: "What about your daddy's Viper?" Clay responds like any man would: "This beast's got 500-horsepower and a Borla exhaust system. Is does 0-60 in what—4.3 seconds?"

But it's Sean's response that always kills me. He glances at his Monte Carlo, and then at the Viper, and with a smile, says: "Wow. You can read the brochure."

In that moment, I always feel an overwhelming sense of clarity. I'm not sure if my knowledge, experience, and interest in automobile engineering will ever be enough to satiate my own hunger. What I am sure of is that simply knowing isn't ever enough.

Crashing

For every force in nature, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

- Newton's Third Law of Motion

On the radio near my Aunt Columbia's bedside, unfamiliar voices hummed stories of dictators, suicides, and atomic bombs. Phrases new to America—V-E Day, the United Nations, even nuclear war—somehow stranger to the mouths of Illinoisans pinned near the state's boot. I heard families argued that the land was richer in fields as far south as Northerners could get. They have always been trapped: nice, but not nice enough; rural, but not quite country; smart, but not too cultured. Even during the war, though, Aunt Columbia had paved her own way. By the early 1940s, she was one of the first women in Wheatland Township to drive her own car.

Sitting silently in front of her short oak vanity, her radio was her only company. She swooped up her ash blonde hair and wrapped it into a tight bun. The vanity was littered with various trinkets: a small brass frame holding a photograph of her daughter, a metal powder box filled with wildflowers, a single strand of pearls.

Through my collection of family photographs, I have followed her around the house many times. The wooden white façade and stonewash chimney were simple, and the tin porch roof belted wet notes in the rain. In October, purple pansies bloomed in the brick basins lining the sidewalk. The plum petals and dandelion hues formed a tiny face in each flower—floral heads with gaping mouths, solemn, and eyes shaped like tear

drops. The green stem necks held each one upright as the wind rustled the season's final leaves in nearby trees.

I have always assumed Columbia was preparing herself for a trip into the town supermarket. She had been known to gather groceries in the morning because most evenings, Pastor Smithson came over for dinner. She believed that one of the greatest ways to serve the Lord's kingdom was to feed his hungry men, and her listed reflected that notion—eggs, potatoes, flour—with a handwritten recipe card for brown gravy tucked behind the scrawled grocery scrap.

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In 2012, I sat silently in my own home and thumbed through the thick family photo albums. We never threw anything out, so the second story of our cabin served as a private genealogical museum. My mother had saved items others might deem worthless—eyeglasses, broken toys, an autographed cast from a broken ankle—arguing that these things had more value than anything money could provide.

In the kitchen, I made two eggs with my grandmother's cast iron skillet. From the kitchen window, geese pooled near the pond water in our front yard. Their bodies were fat with feathers smooth across their backs like pillow cases, and the one-two of their steps quickened at the smallest sound.

I placed the food on the kitchen table and sat adjacent from the geese scene. I could distinguish the families: the mothers, fathers, and goslings. My own mother had once told me that geese mated for life, and I wanted so desperately to believe her. The full-grown geese purred as they nuzzled their beaks into gosling down. I pictured myself

as a child again, falling asleep to my mother's touch, and longing, if only for a moment, to feel that warmth again.

Glancing around the breakfast table, I realized for the first time that morning that I was alone.

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Columbia's kitchen table spoke in squeaks. Sugar packets sustained the mismatched legs, preventing the tabletop from wobbling, and butterfly ornaments dangled in the doorways: Monarchs, Swallowtails, Painted Ladies. Hand-crafted and quaint, she had decorated them with her daughter in the summer of '44 while they had sat on the porch, watching insects travel from flower-to-flower.

Outside her kitchen window, a string of sheds hid farm machinery, gardening tools, and her 1939 two-door Ford sedan. Even before I could drive, the automobile in the photographs always caught my attention—the wide body frame, curving at the rear and widening up the spine, a drop near the hood before squaring off with two round headlights. My grandfather had told me that Columbia and her husband, Ray, bought a new car every year. Ray kept a ledger where he detailed each purchase, and he hid it beneath his journal in a cabinet him and Columbia called the Rat's Nest. The cabinet held all kinds of gadgets, including a basket of colorful rubber fish and a miniature cow with udders that shot out milk.

Columbia's particular Ford, the one parked out in the shed, had a grille composed of a series of slots in black and chrome. The car was quite the contrast from the scarlet Farmall H tucked in the corner of the scrap metal garage. Of the things I had learned

growing up on a farm, never being surprised by the contents of a shed was near the top of my list. The Ford was no exception. It was flawless.

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There are photographs tucked away in family albums that no one has ever talked about: ones with men I have never met, and places I have never visited. When I started flipping through the album, I found myself admiring the photographs that housed extended family portraits. There was always an older couple sitting near the center, often holding a couple of grandchildren. Partners circled around the center, each pair like a moon orbiting a planet. Most of their faces were coated with scowls and grimaces, and I wondered if they ever argued about how long it took to hold a smile.

The children were more like stars: stone-faced and quiet, yet the brightest with no knowledge that their faces would one day match their fathers. I picked out my grandpa's tiny bald head. He was no more than a year old, propped up against his mother's belly with arms held out towards the camera.

Between these photographs were ones of myself—younger, smiling, head tilted forward in a denim dress and John Deere hat—wrapped in the arms of people I once knew, but hardly remembered. An aunt who was unexpectedly diagnosed with ovarian cancer. A cousin who died of a heart attack when his daughter was only three. My great-grandmother's niece, who was also her adopted sister, who lost the will to live because of a broken heart. We were all in this book together, like we had never left.

Some of the photographs also captured old cars with running lights and backseat curtains, faded ink scribbles lining the white trim sides. I traced the frame and identified

the years, makes, and models. It was often sleuth work, placing a car within its history. These vehicles were no different than their owners, though, and revolved around the center. The horse-drawn carriage evolved; the Model T, then the Model A.

The last photograph was of a small child, no older than five or six, dressed in all white with long, blonde hair. Her arm was propped up on the chair behind her, lips flat and eyes dark. When I asked my mother who the girl was, she told me about Columbia.

***

My grandparents were scattered between rural Illinois farms and coal country Ohio, but no one ever stayed there. Born in Illinois in 1905, Columbia was tucked away in our family tree. Her sister would later become my great grandmother, and my mother would share that Columbia and I nearly shared a name if it wasn't for my father.

At sixteen, I stumbled upon Columbia's tombstone in a small cemetery a few miles north of my childhood home. Protected by a chain-link fence and a single lamplight, both her birth and death date were scratched deep into the marble stone. Ray's name was etched next to hers, but his death date was much fresher—2006—nearly sixty years after Columbia had passed away.

I've thought about ways to humanize someone I'll never meet; a woman I know, not through experience, but through still-frame images and childhood conversations with her widowed husband and daughter. When the two of them visited with me at family reunions, I was never McKenzie, but Alan's granddaughter. I've embraced that identity. Just like the Model A was replaced by the Model B, my grandfather was replaced by me.

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In one of the photographs, Columbia's husband, Ray, propped himself up on a rusty shovel near the sheds. He looked as if he was scanning the yard, drawing a long yawn and waiting for the chilly air to brighten the blood vessels in his cheeks. Near his feet sat a toolbox with one big hammer and numerous nails, and on the other side, strips of sheet metal organized by strength and length. He had used the tin scrap for reinforcement, spending hours fortifying the sheds that had already been built. Though his lips were tight, I imagined he was celebrating: the war was over and his family was safe. He had missed the draft by a few months. Forty-six was too old for a solider.

In 2003, my grandfather and I visited Ray in an assisted living facility an hour from my home. Ray's hands were thin and bruised, and he sat next to his wife—a woman who was no longer Columbia. Above his head, a railroad clock chimed noon. The tiny steam engine powered around the track and clicked to mark the hours. Ray pursed his lips. He refused to speak until the train had stopped moving.

***

I've always wanted to ask Columbia what it felt like when she learned to drive; how it felt now, in photographs, sitting in the driver's seat, practicing her downshift on the column, hearing the flatline V8 pep up and pour out eighty-five horsepower on a small stretch of wide, rural road. In the sleepy fields behind her, I've imagined the train tracks, just hidden from view.

I tell myself that we would have had so much to offer one another; that she loved cars as much as I do, and if she were here, we could go on afternoon drives and ramble

on about the industry and how things have changed since the 1940s. I want to explain the revolution of the monobloc to her, detailing how the casting, crankcase, and cylinder heads all cozied up under a single engine block. How Henry Ford mass-produced the lines and transformed the entire market with the make and model of car once sitting on her property. I tell myself that I wasn't too late, but I soon return to the present.

When I pull myself away, Columbia turns from the kitchen window and disappears into the depths of the house.

***

Outside my home, a 1990 Dodge Dynasty—glorious gold patina and suede seats—waited, wanting nothing more than to be driven, just like every car does. It never mattered that my friends separated the syllables: "Dye-NASTY," as if the car disgusted them. It wasn't anything like the '39 Ford. The body frame was short and squat, like too much weight had been placed on the roof. It had come out of the Belvidere Assembly Plant, an individual amongst 283,702 other Dodge Dynasties, only to travel through the hands of two previous owners before finally coming to me.

***

Outside Columbia's house, I imagined her offering Ray a parting kiss before she went into town. He embraced her in a hug, letting the shovel slide from the shed and land sharply on the ground, and she reminded him of Pastor Smithson's visit. Before she let go, she promised to be back soon, but her words were lost in the breeze. As I imagined

her opening the car door and climbing into the Ford, I wanted nothing more than to stop her.

If I only could have reached out from behind the sheds, beneath the kitchen table, across the bedroom vanity—drug her out of the driver's seat, ushered her inside, begged her to hug her daughter—guided her fingers along the ceramic butterflies, tempting her to listen to their clay chimes. If I could have done these things, I would have.

Instead, she turned the key. The engine stalled, drawing oxygen into the downdraft carburetor. The fuel and air blended and ignited, waking up the sleepy haze of pistons and pushrods, and she backed out of the shed, listening to the tires crunch on the path leading away from home.

***

When I think about Columbia, I picture someone who was both entirely, yet absolutely nothing like myself. How our eyes might have been the same shade of hazy green, or how our laughs could have shared a dry and wheezy cadence. How at conception, she had been fused together with the spare parts of our ancestors, and these parts, coming together, created a system of breath for both of our bodies; blood vessels like fuel lines pumping to destinations hidden beneath the complexities of aluminum and flesh. When the transmission sputtered going down the road, it was simply instinct that she forgot to look both ways before crossing the train tracks.

Perhaps the clutch loosened, flooding, and the roar of steel wheels drowned out her breathing. Perhaps she had a moment to glance around, staring at the massive engine barreling down the tracks. She might have thought of Ray or Wanda, or their house, or

the dinner with the pastor. Maybe she thought about what it would feel like—the impact—or where her soul would drift once she died. Maybe she thought of nothing, and only saw darkness, clinching both her eyes shut and waiting for it all to be over. Perhaps at the scene of the crash, there was no distinction between bone and body.

***

When I drove the Dynasty down our driveway, I never expected to wake up in a bed of steel and glass. Flames poured from beneath the hood and the exhaust, thick and dark, and slipped through the cracked windows. Only seconds before, my body surged backward, then reversed, recoiling off the steering wheel and throwing me back into the driver's seat. I was surrounded by puddle of fluids—a blend of transparent red and murky black—and the recollection of the crash. Chewing cuticles, eyes strained, no tail lights. Flecks of metallic paint floated through the empty windshield and coated the smashed dash. I looked around, staring blankly at the bent hubcaps and blurred lights. Car oil was lit ablaze as cars inched down the street. I wondered if they were taking bets on whether I had survived.

The Dynasty was ripped in two through the back of a pick-up truck. They were my neighbors, and I had been close to home: a stretch of land panning out across southwestern Illinois, most of it flat, lonely, and now backed up for miles. I hadn't been paying close enough attention. I remembered the radio dial, the clock, something about Daylight Savings and how I thought I was going to be late for bus. There was a volleyball game going on at a neighboring town, and the buses were waiting for the players outside the gymnasium at the school. The moment it happened, those thoughts disappeared.

I felt a sharp pain in my knee, and shortly after, a slow-building tightness in my chest. The airbags had deployed and were now limp, flopped out of the dash like jellyfish that had lost their sting. My head felt heavy. I jiggled the door handle, desperate to get out, but exhausted in my effort to move from the driver's seat. I thought about my parents: where they were, what they were doing, how I was going to call them. Just like everything else in the car, my cell phone had ricocheted off the seat and lodged itself behind the dash. I didn't have the energy to look for it, so I fought off the sore sleep and waiting for someone to pull me out.

The officer who arrived on the scene was broad and coffee-breathed. He heaved me from the car, propping me up between a stop sign and a bumper. We sat next to each other. He touched my bleeding knee. He didn't know about the brake-line leaks, at least not in this moment, so instead, he lectured me on the importance of driving safely. As I steadied my breathing, he shook his head and said, "You're awfully lucky, kid. Most of them don't walk away from accidents like this one."

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At the moment of a collision, all parts are dispersed into the atmosphere. Opposing forces stimulate reclamation: particles acknowledged, but never seen. We grapple with these forces—ignition keys and whiffs of gasoline—as if our garages birth these bodies into motion. When I think about Columbia, I imagine the 1939 two-door Ford sedan and its engine lullaby. How on impact, the steel and glass must have felt so much like skin.

I closed the photo album and placed it on the kitchen table. Glancing down at my hands, I realized they look just like Columbia's.