



4-15-2018

Maybe She Found Me in a Poem

Robin Gow

Ursinus College, rogow@ursinus.edu

Adviser: M. Nzadi Keita

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/english_hon

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

[Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Gow, Robin, "Maybe She Found Me in a Poem" (2018). *English Honors Papers*. 6.
https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/english_hon/6

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Honors Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. For more information, please contact aprock@ursinus.edu.

Maybe she found me in a poem

By Robin Gow
04/20/2018

Submission statement: Submitted to the Faculty of Ursinus College in fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Creative Writing.

Abstract

Maybe She Found Me in a Poem explores my own family relationship and family stories through a variety of poetic forms, persona poetry, and prose pieces centered on an imagined relationship with my grandmother who died before I was born. The collection asks, “how much are our family stories our own?” and “Can we create memory?” Themes of haunting, ghosts, queerness, shared memory, death, and burial are carried throughout the collection and brought forward in their respective sections. Images are placed throughout as part of the collection to amplify the “haunting” power of the text.

Table of Contents

Intro	6
Tree	7
Ghosts	
PHOTOGRAPH	10
We were eight	11
Inventing Ancestors	12
Almost	14
Mom believed in ghosts	16
Closets	18
Our Mother of Divine Providence	21
Priscilla	23
I'm 21	25
Banana split	27
PHOTOGRAPH	28
Banana Bread	29
My grandmother's house	31
Backyard	32
How do you remember a voice?	34
Billy's Navy	36
Plastic Blue Helmets	37
If You Knew	39
The Navy Blue Dress	41
Un-naming	44
When death came for my grandfather	46
Você vai voltar	49
Let's Light Candles	52
58 Beads	53
Green Lights	55
PHOTOGRAPH	59
She would have loved you	60
On the way home	62
Ouija	65
Not leaving	68
Blood	
PHOTOGRAPH	70
Inheritances	71
In a yellow and white bikini	73
The Neighbors	76
The Rockettes	78

The Gift of Gab	81
Fabric	83
Teddy	85
PHOTOGRAPH	89
Dance!	90
Hold on tighter	92
Gas Station Lights	95
PHOTOGRAPH	98
Becoming a Woman	99
Burning Love	106
sometimes i think of you as Eleanor Rigby	108
Hair	109
How high the moon	112
Practically Catholic	115
Saying Grace	118
So so high up	120
PHOTOGRAPH	123
Babe Ruth	124
I have this dream	128
Kiss	130
Burial	
Sarah	135
Where is my grandmother buried ?	140
Are you afraid of the dark?	143
We could keep driving	144
Hold Still	146
What happens to you when I stop writing?	148
How to Blow Up a Whale	150
I was trying to feel some kind of goodbye	159
PHOTOGRAPH	163
Noble Street	164
Reburying my uncle in the attic	166
How to fold a slice of pizza	169
She laughed like a pink rose bouquet	171
Humpback Whale Braces for the Torpedo	172
Sometimes i run away with my grandmother	174
Purgatory	175
A New House on Farragut Street	178
Who lives in my father's house?	182
Too old	184

What's supposed to happen	187
So beautiful	189
PHOTOGRAPH	192
Things Remembered	193
Tell me a bedtime story	195
Cut back the Ivy	197
Family tree	199
These orchards	201

Intro

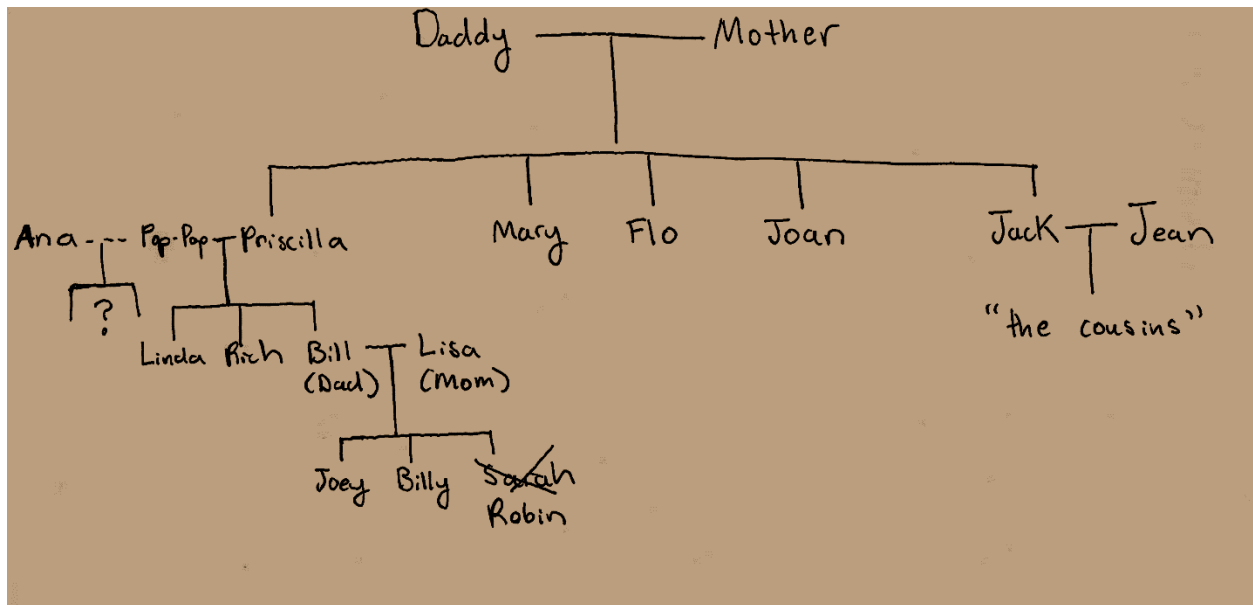
i have a radical love
Pop-pop standing lean & lanky in his American-flag swim trunks—Priscilla's
smile full of blueberries—Mother lifting pineapple upside-down cake from her oven's
mouth—

there's no dates on these pictures—
names were written under my tongue—
faces that are supposed to belong to me—
nuns with their hands knotted behind their backs & birthday cakes for Jack &
Michael—now men with their shirts tucked in & brown belts
walk into the living room

what have I been doing sleeping in photo albums?
do these histories make a house or an attic?
sometimes i feel like they could belong to anyone—these bodies—this red-dressed
Aunt Mary & Pop-pop in a white blazer—
these black & white weddings that want color—
Dad was a warm baby
here are my father & my uncle watermelon stained-children
the Aunts in their blue reclining chairs—
wiping pretzel crumbs off their laps

be careful when you turn pages

Family Tree



Author's note

I avoided this for a long time. First I told myself I would start writing a formal piece about my artistic process over winter break and then that became “first week of classes” which has turned into sitting in my room on the last day of Spring Break. When I first started writing about my grandmother I didn’t think that there would be enough to write about—I actually asked Dr. Keita if we could “explore other themes”. Over the course of the next few months I generated over four-hundred pages and I still feel unfinished. I still have more questions I want to ask her as I continue to live my life while simultaneously conjuring hers.

She has brought with her more ghosts—sewing me into my family. The stories that sparked my interest in my family history like the one of my grandfather blowing up a whale in World War II or of my own father hiding painted turtles inside my grandmother’s dresser that once seemed concrete—simple fragments of other people’s lives have opened like swimming pools. I think of when I was eight & learning how to sink to the bottom of the deep end—letting out air bubbles from my nose—feeling the dangling weight of my own bones. Our families are places we can sink into.

When I first imagined this project I thought I would be spending hours tediously interviewing family members about their lives and experiences to get enough fabric to make stories but as I began to adopt personas—as I began to put my own life in conversation with my family I started to construct a collection that is founded on a rejection of concrete history & an embracing of our family’s past as a kind of haunting. My collection & the history it relays of my grandmother & I is real & un-real. It is a new/old history that exists only with me—it argues that each of us has a different claim to the history we find to be our own.

The theme I found most hard to write about throughout the collection was my queerness. It has always been a source of pain with my family & part of the effort of this collection that has always under-pinned my goals has been to discover queerness in my family history. I think it's fair to say that my writing has helped me find that queerness is not necessarily something you can discover in someone else—but I have built touch points where I have felt more understood about my queerness. In pieces like “Sarah” or “Becoming A Woman” I both articulate my own queerness and find moments of discomfort in others that create moments of listening between stories. I especially loved crafting “parallel” pieces like “Babe Ruth” or “Hair” for this reason: to illustrate that despite these family members different lives that we have lived instances of the similar emotion.

Something I reject is that I do feel like queerness is hushed in this collection—almost as if queerness is haunting it. I was struck when Dr. Keita told me that she hadn't entirely noticed the themes of queerness & longing in my second section “Blood”. I realized it was because these were emotions so swallowed by myself as a writer that few of those actual tensions surface in my work. The last poems I wrote for this collection that are in the first person I feel like I finally took on those themes—using the “I” in a very “stripped down” and honest way. (Which is ironic because I also use a lower case ‘i’ in those poems to diminish the authority of the first person).

Telling my family that I'm writing about my family has never resulted in a full conversation. I will mention that I'm writing about “us”. I have more clearly explained my interest in my grandmother but never into the details. It creates a hush in the room. I've noticed that if my father is sitting at the bar stool in the living room that he'll get up & move to the kitchen. My mother seems to tense. No one asks questions about it.

I know that I want them to read it but I'm scared that they'll think that it's a lie. Because in the ways in which we as humans define truth—in many respects—this is a lie. This is not a memoir where I sat to record the actual lives of my family members. These are memories and reverberates of photographs & artifacts pulled from cardboard boxes in attics. This is my history as I see it & experience it.

I fully believe that by writing about my grandmother that I have discovered her voice. There are lines that ache with her letters & journal entries. There are also stories about her that I created but that I believe are real. I have never actually found one of her poems to read—I like to think that someday I'll come across one when we clean out my great aunt's house. Maybe it'll be on the back of a napkin shoved in the inside cover of a bible—maybe it'll be in a rosary box or between encyclopedia volumes on the rec room shelf.

For now, this is her poetry as much as it is mine.

-ROBIN GOW

Ghosts



We were eight

in 1939 my grandmother was eight.

i was in 2nd grade & i did karate & i still bought shoes for their colors
the world was 2004 years old & i ate zucchini bread & watched cartoons
laying on my stomach

& she was eight

it was the great depression but at school she ate lunch with her sisters & Daddy
had a job at the railroad—i wonder if she sat with her feet underneath her bottom
like me & if it was strange to have one boy in her entire class

& i was eight

when 9/11 came around everyone stood up in the lunch room at the same
time as the first plane hit & they told us to have a moment of silence
& i wondered how long a moment was supposed to be & i thought about
buying two chocolate milks instead of one

& she was eight

& there was a war in europe & there was tall headlines on her father's newspaper
in the morning before work & the adults talked about war & when she imagined it
she could only think of everything falling apart in a great big explosion

& i was eight

& to me war was my brother's green army men lined up on the arm of the
sofa—i licked the imitation cheese from cheese fries at the pool & i had two
pet toads named skippy & jumpy

& she was eight

& her mother made egg salad sandwiches & she sat at the table by Mary & Joan &
Flo—sometimes Joan spilled her milk

& i was eight &

i begged for lunchables like other kids or those microwave dinners with the
smiley-face potatoes & star-sprinkles to pour into pudding

& she was eight &

on her birthday she got a journal & she wrote her dreams before she went to sleep
& downstairs her mother's hands were pruned from dish water & the radio
crooned goodnight

& i was eight

on my birthday Uncle Rich got me a journal
“write—write—write” said the inside cover

& she was eight

she sometimes drew the pear tree in her backyard

& i was eight &

i published three-page chapter books

& she was eight

& i was eight

Inventing ancestors

Writing is an act of haunting.

Aunt Flo told me last summer she thought the house was haunted. Aunt Mary wasn't in the room. She said she had always known it was haunted—not just by Joan—but by all of them—her fiancé—her mother—her uncles—all the people who lingered in black & white pictures on the counters. This was a year after Aunt Joan passed away.

I don't think knowing the concrete history of your family will help you figure out where to go. It's how you decide to read it. The narratives of the people of our past could be a million unwritten stories & I don't really think my family belongs to just me—I just think I have the unique opportunity to interact with them—*haunt* with them.

I don't think I want to write the truth. I don't want to claim to own these stories but I do want to listen to them. I'm their queer poet child. I'm looking for fragments of myself in them & their fragments in me. We live, this story, like a moving stained glass window—trading saint halos—trading grandmothers—trading blue gumballs outside Mama's Pizzeria.

So, this is how I came to Linda. Linda was supposed to be my father's sister—she would have been the eldest. Pop-Pop & Priscilla named her even though she died being born. I didn't know about her till this summer. I have been curious about her ever since. I kept wondering who she could still be—or who she would have been. Who she is now.

She came up when Aunt Flo & me were talking. Aunt Flo & Mary were describing a transgender distant cousin to me who had a birth name of Linda but whose name is Frankie. They were pretty much fascinated that he could just “Become a man.” Aunt Flo kept saying, “She just became a man—that just happens I guess.” This was followed with a heavy Catholic pause.

“They were gonna name the baby Linda—Bill's sister,” Aunt Flo added.

“Who?” I asked. “Dad had a sister?”

“Not really—oh Pris was devastated,” Flo said. “Oh, it was horrible. Just awful. What a shame.”

Flo likes to talk about things like they're happening RIGHT NOW. Aunt Joan died more than three years ago now & she's still talking about hospice as if the hospital bed as if it's still in the living room.

“How old was she?”

“She wasn't even a baby,” Mary added—dismissing the conversation.

“I thought Linda was a wonderful name—just wonderful,” Flo said. “Don't you Mary?”

“A sister would have kept those boys in check,” Mary said—shuffling towards the kitchen to check on her microwave lasagna.

Flo continued, “They didn't even know if they wanted to try again but then they had Bill. God gave them Bill and then of course Rich. Priscilla loved those boys.”

That was the end of the conversation about Linda. I haven't really stopped thinking about her. I keep seeing her in the living room at the bar while Flo and Mary make their Manhattans each night before bed. She's there laying on the couch—legs sprawled out—maybe smoking a cigarette like Aunt Joan used to. I imagine she drinks Diet Coke from the mini fridge when the Aunts aren't looking. Maybe sometimes they wonder where the drinks are going, but they don't say anything. They're scared they're getting Alzheimer's like their sister did.

Linda loves Christmas—the cyclical adornment of the house is almost like being able to leave. Linda is trapped there—sleeps on wrapping paper boxes in the attic.

Maybe she goes upstairs to the attic & looks through old boxes of photos—pages through photo albums. Maybe she imagines herself among the family vacations of who would be her brothers. She builds a memory of a sand castle in New Jersey & the tide coming in to take it away. She remembers baking cupcakes for birthdays—licking icing off candles. She remembers everything because if she doesn't no one will.

I imagine her as queer like me. She'd be the hardcore butch lesbian type—stealing Dad & Uncle Rich's girly magazines—cutting holes in her jeans with Mother's craft scissors.

When the Aunts go to bed they leave on most of the lights in the house because Flo hears ghosts upstairs. Mary is too tired to walk through each room to flick each switch off once Flo is in bed.

Outside the pear tree blooms this year. It drops fruit like fists—punching at the soil. Linda walks out there. Barefoot she picks up a fruit to munch on while sitting on the back step.

I walk up & sit there with her. I teach her the game to play with the broken lawn darts still in the garage from when Dad & Uncle Rich were young. It's called "Bun-er" & you lob the wonky lawn darts at a Kaiser bun to try to get them to stab the bun. The goal is to be able to pick the whole roll up by the dart. You can only play it with stale or moldy buns (Mary's rules)—but we don't always listen. Linda & I just nab a potato roll from the bread box in the kitchen—the one next to the cookie jar brimming with M&M Chips Ahoy.

Linda asks how I could find her if she's barely ever been alive. I tell her I'm in the process of inventing ancestors. She thinks that's kind of rude & argues that she did in fact have a name as she tosses the blue lawn dart high in to the air—

It stabs the moon & we stand on each other's shoulder to pull it out so Mary & Flo won't notice it the next night.

I try to call it a tie but she says that pegging the moon is, without a doubt, a win for her.

Almost

christmas morning
 i am the first one up
nutmeg—warm oven—
 break gingerbread walls
 royal icing roof—i ate
 the chimney at the
dining room table
 bite Santa's
 crumbly chocolate-
 crackle cookie
mom's dead now
 & Santa Claus asleep in a cardboard
box—the attic—a pinecone—
 a box of white shoes—
 i'm small enough to fit in your
 hand—
oh these porcelain men—
 like daddy—
floor creaks upstairs
 it's Billy
 getting dressed for church
button by button

i touch wrapping paper creases
 i'm a fold—a corner—
 crinkle bow—glossy touch—
morning is smooth—a single
 strain of tinsel—
 pine-needle prickle—
oh how i was to feel everything—
 scratchy couch cushion—
 leather boot lace—
when i was younger—
 caressing newspapers—
 fingers skating
 round coffee mug rims—
mom would remember
 & she would wrap me up—a corner
 a crease—
a bow (a red bow) &
 unwrap me—
i tear through the ceiling to
 blue morning—there is the sky—
 i'm beneath

blue shiny ornaments—
 dangle with me
 from the bottom branches
in 1962
i was almost born
 mom too
 daddy always
 listening to the hole
 i clawed in the ceiling—
mom let me in when i knocked
on her forehead
 a step into her dreams
we baked almond cookies & sometimes
 she'd wake up & look right at me
 (or maybe right through me)
now & again she still comes by—
she doesn't stick around long
 she finishes old crosswords
 kisses cold windows—
her lips haunting
door frames—
 i am here
 the spirit
of your cold breath
 becoming vapor

billy walks in
 i say what i always say
hi i'm Linda
& i was almost born
almost your sister
 doorway lingering arms crossed
eyeing bows & gold wrapping paper
 he takes a bite
 chocolate Santa
cookies & yells upstairs
 for rich

Mom believed in ghosts

unpack a house—

everything will never fit—

not the
bump in the wooden floor
where Billy shot the BB gun or

the singed carpet
upstairs when we played with
Daddy's matches—

Out back there's still army men
who were lost on our
expeditions to the moon—

Mom believed in ghosts

& Billy won't play Ouija

When we were packing he
told me to leave it

the Aunts won't like it—

slipped in my red back pack
didn't tell anyone—

it's our little secret

on the bedroom floor
while Billy's at football

I take the board out

long black box—
lights turned off

hands on the planchette—

we talk—we really do

I ask her the date
JANUARY 13 1975

I take a hold of
The triangle & I spell
words to her—

I say

I M-I-S-S Y-O-U

I say

T-O-D-A-Y
I F-E-E-L
L-O-N-E-L-Y

I say

A-R-E T-H-E-R-E
M-O-V-I-E T-H-E-A-T-E-R-S
U-P T-H-E-R-E ?

If there were movie theaters
I know she would go—
Maybe she has a record player

I pretend
that tomorrow I will
come home from school
to our house in
Malvern with the bathroom
still smelling like
her sickly rose perfume—

the one she sprayed
before going to
work at the hospital

*what day is today,
mom?*

Closets

Linda was my first family member to come out as queer.

To be fair it was a little bit easier for her because she's spent nearly her entire life on earth as a ghost.

The closets in the Aunt's house are haunted spaces. I lived in Aunt Joan's room for one summer & her closet still brims with clothing—Joan's bright green Christmas sweaters with multi-color lights—a professional blazer—American flag pin on the lapel—one beige shoe. Crumpled in a corner: Rich's black leather jacket & sunglasses—an audaciously red scarf—yellow mitten (hole in the thumb). I added my khakis & short pink & blue rompers—dangling on warped metal hangers.

Aunt Flo's closet down the hall is the same way—Mother's shoulder-padded dresses & more of Aunt Joan's clothing that Flo wears now—the sea shell pants with matching light house pants & earrings. They seldom come upstairs so I inspect each room like a museum, me just another specter flitting past.

Mary's dresser's over-populated with ancient rust glistening jewelry (none of which she bothers to wear)—broches, ornate white clip-on earrings, a clover hat pin that reads "Kiss me I'm Irish."

Night breaks in summer like a vase on the kitchen floor—sudden—scattering. I pull the pink blinds of my windows shut to keep the lamp light from escaping.

I feel the all the clothing's throbbing—yearning. They want bodies—the bodies they can't have anymore. They want warm skin & breath.

Linda never had any clothing of her own. She died when she was born.

She assembles her outfits from mismatched items—swiped from all the different closets. She jokes with me—holding up a muted yellow sweat.

"How could I ever come out of the closet? It's where I get all my clothes."

We sister laugh & swim in Mother's nylons & pencil skirts.

Tonight, she settles on wearing Priscilla's navy dress.

How would you feel in the body of your mother?

She stands & looks at herself in the foggy full length mirror in Flo's bathroom. She turns around. She doesn't like how feminine it makes her—how mother-like & soft.

"Could I be a woman?" she asks me.

I shrug because I don't really know what I am half the time.

She fishes in Mary's dresser to find an old lip-stick. She leans over the sink to slather on a fresh coat of red. She smiles—she frowns—she kisses the mirror & wipes it off with her thumb.

"Perfect," she says & meanders back into Aunt Joan's room where I sit on the bed scrolling on my iPhone.

"I like it," I say.

"I want a leather jacket," Linda says, turning to Joan who is reading a mystery novel, leaning back in the wicker chair.

"Maybe Mary has one," Joan teases.

"Rich's is too big," Linda laments. She sneaks over to Joan's jewelry box to steal the fish necklace she likes so much—it's scales auburn & gold by lamplight.

"What are you dressing up for?" I ask.

"No one."

“I didn’t ask who,” I muse. Gows wear love in a mischievous way; in the corners of our mouths—our rolled back shoulders.

“Oh, well—still. No one,” she says as she walks up the attic stairs to dig through boxes. I follow her.

“I need something more butch to balance out the dress. I wish there was an eyeliner pencil out somewhere so I could really have a look. I want to be one of those punk rock girls.”

“You’d like my closet at my parent’s house.”

She pushes past the uncles who were priests, full cassocks & rosaries. They huddle in the attic corner praying for us in a circle. Linda doesn’t say “excuse me” or anything. She ignores them.

“What are they praying about?” I ask.

“For us.”

“Because?”

“Because we’re gay.”

“Oh.”

We hear footsteps coming up the stairs.

“What are you doing in my dress?” Priscilla asks, stepping over a mound of Santa Claus statues Linda knocked over.

“Oh—I thought I would try a new look.”

“You look so old—all grown up.”

“I’m as grown up as I want to be,” Linda says.

“I didn’t think that dress would be your style.”

“It’s not really... I need a jacket to balance it out.”

“Like one of Billy’s?”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t think there’s any here.”

Linda sighs.

“You could have asked me if you wanted to dress up,” Priscilla says—putting the Santas back in the box—always tidying up.

“You don’t have to clean that up—let me help,” I say. We all bend down & collect them off the scruffy wood floor. Linda hurries because she doesn’t want to be late.

“So, you’re not just dressing up for fun? I can finish up here—don’t you have somewhere to be all dressed up?”

“I do—I can be late. I mean I’m always late anyway.”

Linda pauses a moment & glances up at her mother as she drops the last Santa into the box. She wipes the lipstick off on the back of her hand—feeling silly for trying it.

“Mom?”

“Yes?”

“Can I talk to you?”

“Aren’t we talking?” Priscilla asks—closing the box lid. “Good as new.”

“Yes, but about something else.”

“Oh... what is there to talk about that we haven’t talked about?” she asks because they have been ghosts for longer than time allows them to remember.

They knew each-others favorite colors—magenta & lime—favorite snacks—string cheese & Waldorf salad—favorite songs—anything Elvis—how Linda likes open windows & Priscilla likes the smell of meatball sandwiches

Linda sits down on a box of Christmas ornaments. I find a bare patch of floor to settle in.

“I’m going somewhere tonight,” Linda says.

“I know.”

“What?”

“You leave every Thursday night—it’s what you do. Where do you go?”

Linda leans in. She says, “I leave out the bay window because its most exciting exit. I follow the street lamps until the road disappears—until there’s no more sidewalk. I walk there and then there is a tree—a tall tall elm tree that died a long time ago—it’s ghost tree and there near the ghost tree—“

“Yes?”

“There I met someone.”

“You met someone?”

“I met some GHOST I mean.”

“Oh.”

“Her name is the-girl-by-the-elm-trees and she wears the nicest plaid skirts and knee-high socks.”

“Why wouldn’t you tell me about her?”

Linda sighs. She breathes deep.

“Because I love her. Not like you or Billy or Dad or Uncle Rich or the Aunts. I love her like—like the ivy loves to return to the backyard fence—like the hydrangeas love to burst in March.”

“I know that,” Priscilla says. “I’m your Mother of course I knew that.”

“You did?”

“Of course—I love you no matter if you’re a ghost or a girl or a... a lesbian? Is that what you call it?”

“I guess that’s what I am then. Maybe not. I don’t really know. You’re not mad at me?”

Priscilla furrows her brow. “Why would I be mad at you?”

“You know... you’re Catholic and all.” She glances at our uncle priests chanting in the corner of the attic under the slanted roof.

“You’re Catholic too,” Priscilla says—putting her hands on her hips. “And you,” she says pointing at me.

“Right right,” Linda says even though she’s never been to church & plans on never going. We share a glimpse of a smile—the heretic children.

We walk down the stairs together. She locks arms with me & says, “I hope you find a girl to sit with beneath a ghost tree. You know—she makes me want to pretend we’re not dead. Sometimes we pretend to be alive.”

Our Mother of Divine Providence

Mother waits up Allendale Rd.
her body sturdy wooden
pews—holy water
trickle—organ humming
late into night—

Mother knows
the contours of all
our spines—she
knows our aunts
in white veils &
sisters in communion
dresses & altar boy
brothers drinking
sacristy wine before
mass—

Mother listens
to her door lock—to
Aunt Mary walk
wrinkled knuckles
into first
rosary decade—
to Flo asking God again
if he's there—

Mother is there—

touched
each forehead with holy water—
raining down purple
advent & lent—
pink robe only used
for that third Sunday—
light candle—
remember your
Hail Marys—
take your penance to
her stone bare feet

Mother buried Aunt Joan
& married Priscilla
to Pop-pop & Mom to Dad

dressed us all

in black—closed the casket—
lit a white baptism candle—
Mother is old—
Waiting for the next holiday Bazaar
So she can wraps herself in
women's club quilts—

Mother remembers
us—remembers Dad
with softer hands
lighting
her crown of candles—
white robe & short
brown hair—

Mother holds a crucifix
up—each & everyday—
holds his body steady—
nail on nail on
skin—on thorns—on
12 apostles—
on peter denying
god on
on me denying god

Mother knows I
Don't go to mass
anymore & she
loves me still—

I see her through Priscilla's
eyes as John Cardinal O'Hara
& Father McGory break
ground—1962
she watches church skeleton
grow—as
a young veiled
Irish Catholic girl

Priscilla

Prisca:

Feminine form of Priscus, a Roman family name which meant "ancient" in Latin. This name appears in the epistles in the New Testament, referring to Priscilla the wife of Aquila.

"Ancient"—her memory echoes me--encapsulated.

I have formed the belief that maybe I can remember her life for her—that there is blood in me as ancient as her—
ocean become ocean

Ancient: belonging to the very distant past and no longer in existence—

She is not ancient—all existence—I swear here & now to not let her become ancient—she is a page turn in me—belonging to the curve of Uncle Rich's nose & Dad's thick black hair. She is my hands I write with—my insatiable desire to assemble everyone into a poem—what love poems did she leave etched in me?

"Why didn't you name me after grandmom?"

"Because she hated her name," Dad says.

I have been trying to find that particular memory—that moment where she decided that her name didn't fit her—

I see her playing—backyard—tall grass—early spring—plaid knee high wool socks. She lays on her back—she surveys clouds—she sees polar bears & an old man with a bulbous nose.

"Priscilla—you're going to get dirty before the cousins come cover—get back inside," Mother says.

"Prissssss-cilla is always getting dirty," Jack says—drawing out the 's' of her name like the hiss of a snake.

"Am not—don't—I—"

"Now now dear no fussing."

She goes to a room she shares with Flo, Mary, & Joan. She sits on the end of her bed & the feeling starts in her hands—spreading through her veins into her chest. She holds it there—this bad-taste—this disorientation—this wrongness.

"I don't like my name," she tells Mary while brushing her hair.

Mary blinks.

"What's there not to like?"

"It's wrong."

Priscilla:

Roman name, a diminutive of PRISCA. In Acts in the New Testament Paul lived with Priscilla (also known as Prisca) and her husband Aquila in Corinth for a while. It has been used as an English given name since the Protestant Reformation, being popular with the Puritans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow used it in his poem 'The Courtship of Miles Standish' (1858).

How did they pick her name?

Was she the husband of Aquila—a little Irish Catholic girl walking down the streets of Corinth—warm air off coastal plain—rock mountains jutting from horizon—

Did she marry him for love or for money?

Was Aquila also my Pop-pop?

How did she introduce herself?

“I’m Pris—Priscilla Connor.”

“That’s a lovely name.”

“No, it’s not.”

Pop-pop shifts his weight from side to side. He wipes his tar-stained hands with a blue rag.

“Well... I like it.”

“You can call me ‘Pris’.”

Pris:

Short form of PRISCILLA.

She will never be a short form—there is nothing short about her—she is tall—tall pear tree—as Oneia Mountains framing Corinth’s silhouette—

Her vertebrates are a sky scraper—

She is the attic of the Aunts house—full of unopened boxes—Christmas decorations—photo albums haunted & unnamed—

A spiral bound notebook where I place fragments of a poem I intend to write—she is the mast of a war-ship—gliding away from Brazil carrying Pop-pop & his unfulfilled promises—

What would she have named herself?

I'm 21

calendar tacked
to bedroom door—
Priscilla measures
our birthdays
like Flo & Mary—
circles of red marker—

i feel the rings trace
around—circumferencing me

she red- halos us all

Dad & Mom &
Rich & Billy
& Joey & Me—

paces CVS aisles—
opens card after card
to find the right one—

stifles a laugh—
at a group of pugs
in polka-dot
party hats & tutus

an older gentleman
pursuing the
“get well” cards
scowls at her—

hands
bloom with pastel
pink & blue envelops—
she boasts
*My grandson is turning
21 this year*

buys a bag of
hard caramels
at check out—

pops one in her mouth
as she exits through
the automatic doors—

she leans
on the kitchen counter
—practices
writing my name
on the card's
white stomach

this is the fourth
birthday card
she's autographed
for me this week—

she knows it's not
my birthday but
she likes to pretend—

licking envelopes shut—
kissing an American flag
stamp as if it were my cheek—

Banana Split

I'm sitting with Pop-pop in the parking of Dairy Queen on Dekalb Pike.
He doesn't go inside with me because he's a ghost.
The woman at the counter has a name tag that reads "Maddy." Maddy misses a beat "Two banana splits?"
"I have someone waiting for me in the car."
I hand Pop-pop his split. He gets extra whipped cream.
Priscilla is good to talk to. I thought it would be easier to bond with Pop-pop over something concrete like food or an art gallery—something concrete. He's still not talkative. He leans his cane against the inside of my car door.
He puts a plastic red spoon full of hot fudge sauce into his mouth.
"What's your favorite topping?"
He shrugs & takes another bite.
"I like the strawberry."
He mumbles.
"What?"
Louder now "No whipped cream?"
"I—I don't know how many calories are in whipped cream at Dairy Queen so I don't get it."
He sits up in the passenger seat to observe me. He furrows his brow.
"Calories—you know—like—you know what I don't actually know what calories are," I say.
He shrugs again.
It's a Tuesday night. The car gets kind of hot so I roll down the windows.
The parking lot is near empty besides a soccer-mom van full of little-league players all enjoying vanilla soft serve with sprinkles & the occasional business man striding out of the dry cleaners on the corner.
I smile. "When I was little I used to bite the bottom of the cone & the ice cream would melt all over me. Dad would get so upset."
Pop-pop chuckles & wipes some whipped cream from his beard. He reaches across the seat & catches me off guard by patting me on the shoulder like Dad.
The sound of cars from Dekalb Pike whooshes in the background.



Banana Bread

sitting on the white countertop—wooden spoon in hand—i conducted my own cooking show—mom the sous chef—eggs metal-bowl cracked—their gentle ring as she scraped the sides with the mint-blue rubber spatula—

i'm grown up now on holidays i pursue the cabinets & sneak utensils into my back pack & last year i swiped the mint-blue rubber spatula—it's tearing along the side & comes off its wooden handle sometimes but it's great for mashing bananas—

i sprinkle nutmeg & cinnamon—squish overripe bananas between fingers—fold into dough—

i tell my grandmother to stand on the stool so she can reach the counter—it's ten o'clock at night two days before christmas & i want the house to smell warm—did you know nostalgia rises?

i walk up to the third floor of my dorm building—christmas break has a way of turning me into a ghost—

she didn't learn baking like i did—licking fingers—banging pots & pans like daddy's drum set—

my grandmother laughs at her hands deep in banana guts—we wipe palms on thighs—

i would sit on the counter top—opening the lids of spices from the cabinet—mint & thyme—mom would always pull out the rosemary & inhale deeply—

i love rosemary

if she took her eyes off me i would add extra ingredients—clementine lobes & basil leaves—
mix together everything that is good—

i let my grandmother use the spatula—i tell her to be careful because it falls apart easy—we take turns mixing—wrists tired—i lift her up on the counter so we can sit—cradling the white bowl in our laps like an unborn child—

the oven is a kind of dream—a mirage—

she asks if we can go inside—

one time during a game of hide & go seek i climbed in & scared mom so much she laughed—

mom used to let me grease the pan with a handful of margarine—gliding across all the corners—

i tell my grandmother to do the same & the butter glob slips away when she tries to grab it again—the recipe calls for a cup of chocolate chips but we eat about a fourth of it between us—
once in the oven we can really wander—

linger in stairways—sneak into closets—unlock all the doors & windows—

mom & i always burned the banana bread—at least just a little—we would get bored waiting & mom would knit a row & i would write a new song on the pots & pans drum set & just when everything was calm she'd say—

something... something smells like its... burning

i explain to my grandmother that we're burned-crust kind of people—steam blooming from our slices—
crumbs stumbling onto the floor

first bites should be warm—

our ghosts teaming in each slice—

My grandmother's house

She rakes orange-auburn leaves—
raises the red mailbox flag—
lugs garbage out on Tuesdays
cuts her lawn with a push mower—
 waits for my letters

licks envelopes shut—
alphabetizes cook books—
blows open like blue curtains—
a maroon welcome mat
 a pear pie in the oven

i blue bike-ride there—
 stone ricocheting
 off spokes

little red-riding hood
basket full of warm poems & croissants
we read—on her big blue couch—
 dog-ear pages—

become lamp fire
shadows—finger puppets—
laughing light out of
the living room windows —sleep
 heavy hinge—

her house is a place i
go to mark my
height—crayon lines
on playroom wall
 you're getting so big

Dead-end road—bone marrow
elm—door bell
like a blue bird throat—

she meets me on a street with
 no name

Backyard

straw-hat man--
sunglasses &
red suspenders

white plastic chair,
cool lemonade glass
sweating in hand

cane leaning
on door frame

an open box of Keebler cookies
top the fridge—

red plastic cup of
water poured over my head

a blue kiddie pool
in our drought dusty back yard

this picture lives
before
grass seed &
sprinkler dancing

before we white primered
bedroom walls

before ashes
on an attic shelf

before then

Pop-pop pours warm
pool water over my head

I splash him

cloths stick to
our august sweat

I'm naked &
Outside the pool
my small feet make mud

We're proud of our dirt

We pronounce love
with hose water

today I slip off my
black canvas shoes

I walk barefoot
into this picture

mud on my knees
I want to be
small & naked

wind kicks up dust

eyes monarch flutter

grass sprouts
house grows shingles
mailbox steams
a red flag

How do you remember a voice?

Her body poses here—
Tongue-turning pages
of this pink photo album—
fractured light

Her voice resounds
Finger-conjuring-hum
from wine-glass rim—

 this is me aching for
 a voice i never heard—

echo through a photograph—
ring picture frame—
oh she laughs like feet across gravel—
like twig snap in the backyard—
like screen door shut—

 lock her
songs in a hymnal—
read her voice back to the air—

did my grandmother sing in church?
 or did she mouth
 the words like me—

she's here pew-standing
pretending piano notes
come cascading
from the back of her throat
a waterfall—a sonorous brook
uttering bare feet on wood floor

Where is my grandmother buried?

 Shovel—
 dirt knee—wet earth—

listening
ear to the tomb stone—
yawn of a conch shell—
sigh of a wave in Chincoteague
crashing over her sisters

does she sound like me?

imitation—replica—
creak of a model ship— rattle
in the mason jars—
unripe crunch of pear flesh—

her voice is a living entity—
thrives outside her ghost

hollow as a cistern hum—
a coin
dive-bombing into the well
beneath the rec room floor—

the soprano daughter
i sing alone in my green volvo—

i invent a voice deeper than myself—

resting heavy
ocean sand drifting

she is there too—
lilting
through a kelp forest—
we meet—
we bask—
in the hull of each
other's mouths

Billy's Navy

A small cartoon baby plunges in his gigantic bathtub. He sits—smug with his white sailor hat. The battle ships crowd around him—erected from pink soap bubbles.

Uncle Rich drew this picture of a baby before Billy or I was born. “Billy’s Navy.” The picture hangs at the end of the bright yellow hallway upstairs in the sunroom—rainbow-saturated colored pencil birthmarks. Then the delicate shading—gentle pink pirouettes—smudge on the edge of his hand. What a father.

Billy is unborn. He dreams in magentas & mauves. His world smells like lavender. He sleeps inside Dad & Mom. Under their grey pillow cases. He lives their wishes—their wants. He parks his navy in the bathroom. He stands at the mirror & surveys himself. Skin so fresh—he’s almost as pink as the bubbles. Naked of course. The whole bathroom is warm. This Billy is not my brother or me.

When mom & dad learned they were having a girl Uncle Rich did a sketched for another picture to be titled “Sarah’s Safari.” He never finished the picture so this Billy is lonely—kept company only by warships. He would have liked a sibling. He has no mother or father yet. He has a navy. He has his own naked skin & bathwater.

Uncle Rich lives on the other half of our house. The idea sketch for “Sarah’s Safari” floats around Rich’s piles of unfinished doodles. They wait patiently in stacks next to his desk. His side is populated with blank canvases. There are dried tubes of acrylics—sketch books with pages torn out—a photograph of himself in Disney world tacked to the white primerred wall. Beside his desk, he lines up Miller Light beer cans like trophies.

Billy stumbles in—lost & looking for home. He steps on a bottle cap—drips with iridescent bath water.

Uncle Rich scoops him up—cradles him—walks up the staircase.

Should he call him son?

“A bedtime story?”

“Only one, you should be getting back.”

They sit in the dark window sun room. Rich tells the same story again—the one about a time-traveling airplane buried under the lake in Fleetwood park. Billy falls asleep before he’s finished.

Clutching his soft pink body Rich sets him down with a splash back into the drawing & turns out the hall light.

Plastic Blue Helmets

a speckle carpet war I see
those boys
lucky I didn't take
 a green plastic rifle to the heel again

 when it was through, the blue helmets clearly
triumphed from the looks of the brawl—
 toppled red-paint blasting from bullet holes
bent plastic & a cowboys playing time travel
yes Richard must
have invoked the Indians
 their tomahawks raised
 their horses not used to the sight of bombs

This little blue helmet soldier here
 Do they send him to Normandy? Does he write
 letters home?

Does his family keep a purple heart
 on the mantle?

Are his brothers in Okinawa?

 Maybe he knew
 Uncle John—gun dangling
 From a strap around his neck
 A rosary
a fire bombing blood

painted blood beneath a helmet

only god can
 paint blood

does this blue helmet soldier
 come home?

I should put him down yes?

 he should have a name
 he has had a name

a blue helmet name

there are no countries

in boy's wars—
there are only bodies trained
 to catch bullets

mothers who pick up toy
 soldiers

mothers who keep
 black & white

pictures of Uncle John
 helmet askew
 heavy gun

a white cross holding
 hands with another

the games of boys

blue helmet man—
sleep in my pocket
 I'll keep you
just you

If you knew

Jawlines & clavicles
arabesque
of hip & thigh—body
into stanza into charcoal
black line
I've read your drawings

If you knew I
listen to lamp light
& the clamorring of your pencils
on paper
a methodical hush &
erase

If you knew I hear
your records
needle & spin
watch to see
which songs you
replay

If you knew
I tucked the Ouija board
in the bottom of your
dresser

call me when you get home

If you knew
I remember every
Movie we ever watched together

I love the drawing you
Did of us
the one your shed to pieces
& never shared

If you knew I reach into
the trash whenever you throw
out your lines—
oh, Richard I'd peel your
drawings from notebook
page

If you knew
I love your mistakes
 Every oblong forehead
 & dangling
elbow

I've keep your
half-drawings attic-boxed by
 the Christmas
 Ornaments
let's hang them up—unfinished
 & unafraid

If you knew your mother sits
 in the empty seat—
 back of the auditorium
 for graduation

I trust your drawings
a mother is not
 bound to one body

sometimes
when you toss & turn at night
 the moth wings in
your chest
 are me—

me
 the static that watches the TV
 sleep

the egg shells that crack open
 for the sun

the smell of coffee before
 the pot is on

The Navy Blue Dress

Joan held the navy-blue dress to her chest. She turned—surveying her body in the full-length mirror hung on Priscilla’s bedroom door.

Mary came in. “What are you doing?”

Joan thrust the dress at arm’s length.

“Sorting.”

“Some type of sorting.” She opened the closet door wide.

A cautionary silence hung between them.

Downstairs Flo was filling boxes with the boy’s belongings. Her eyes were red and she hadn’t said anything all afternoon.

The house was skeletal. Cold.

Joan had only taken a few steps into the room. Mary stopped next to her. They surveyed—entered step by step—floor creaking beneath them. Joan ran her fingers along the top of the wooden dresser—a light caress. Mary—hands behind her back—nun-like. The window was open just a crack. The curtains flourished. Bed unmade.

Priscilla’s body—all over the room. Crease of the pillow that had held her head. Extra tan pocketbook on the mantle. Black flats—white heels lined up all along the bottom on the dresser.

Pop-pop’s clothing was all gone.

“Figures he’d take his stuff and get out,” Mary scoffed at the vacant side of the closet.

“I imagine it was the most he could do,” Joan muttered.

Mary picked up Priscilla’s pocketbook. “Bet he took the money.” She turned the purse upside down. It was empty.

“I don’t think she had any,” Joan said.

Joan meandered—surveyed the queen-sized bed—the rumpled covers. She wanted to touch the comforter. The blanket had been so close to her sister’s skin—held her so many nights.

Carefully, she grazed her finger across the pillow. Just a touch.

“We should get started,” Mary said—still looking at the clothing on hangers.

“We have all afternoon.”

“I don’t want to be here more than I have to.”

Joan nodded.

Mary had been different since Priscilla passed. She had always been so calm around Pris. Pris’s absence hardened her. Joan hadn’t even seen Mary cry.

Mary picked up the navy blue dress. “I always liked this one.”

“Me too.”

Mary held the dress at arm’s length. “I don’t like to touch it. Feels wrong.”

Joan walked over & took the dress from Mary. “I think I’d look good in it.”

Mary scowled. “We’re not keeping these.”

Joan—flustered—blinked & shook her head—drawing back. “Mary—god damn it what are you trying to do here?” She folded the dress under her arm. “You want to burn them or something? Send them up to god?”

“I think a donation to the Salvation Army would do fine.”

“Oh, don’t pretend like this is all just being moral or something. Did you know Pris? Pris would have wanted us to keep these. She loved these.”

“We’ll keep a few items. Precious jewelry—wedding band,” Mary instructed. She didn’t make eye contact—she fixated on the rows of hangers laden with her sister’s clothes.

“Mary, I don’t think you understand. I’m not letting you get rid of her stuff. Priscilla would have wanted us to wear it.”

“I can’t do that Joan. Joan, I just can’t do this. Can you do this? Do this for me. We have to just give them up. I can’t look at all this—I need a break.”

“You can give up what you need to, but I’m taking some dresses for myself.”

Joan stepped forward & started to yank a few off the hangers. She grabbed a yellow one with a white belt. A red dress—cut right above the knee. A grey skirt. A ruffled blouse.

Mary took a few steps to look out the window towards the back yard.

Joan stopped & followed her there—arms still full of garments.

She set the dresses by the head of the mattress. Joan—the taller sister despite being the youngest—came up behind Mary & wrapped her arms around her big sister. She held her tight. The floor boards moaned beneath them as their weight shifted.

“Mary?”

“Mhm.”

“This isn’t all you—you don’t have to do all of this.”

Mary swallowed. Her nose twitched & then her eyes. She bit lightly on her lower lip. The faint amount of makeup she had dabbed on her cheeks dripped as tears flowed. “I just—I just had to hold it together. For Mother—for Flo—for those boys—those little boys. Joan, I don’t want to be a mother. I never wanted to be a mother.”

“You’re not their mother. She’s their mother.”

“Mother can’t take care of them. You’re too young and Flo can barely keep herself together let alone Billy & Rich.”

“Mary.”

Mary took a card board box from the pile near the door & set it next to the closet. She started to take a green dress off its hanger.

“Mary.”

She folded the dress neatly and set it in the box.

“Mary—I don’t know.”

“I don’t know either.”

Mary stopped. Joan perched on the end of Priscilla’s bed—legs crossed.

Joan smirked.

“What?”

“Oh nothing.”

Mary nodded. “No—tell me.”

“It’s just—I think Pris would have teased me if I asked her to borrow this dress. I had wanted to ask her. I think she would have said my ass was too big to fit in it.”

Mary tried not to smile. “Your ass is too big to fit in it.”

Joan burst—her laugh like a car horn—throwing her head back—bed squeaking—Mary joined—a chuckle—a snort—hands gripping knees—rocking—their laughter bloomed like the azaleas their sister planted in the front lawn—

“Come on Mary there has to be something Pris wore that you’d like.”

“I don’t think so, Joan. I just don’t think I could.”

“You don’t have to take it—just tell me.”

Mary sighed. “You know that nice red pleated skirt she wore last Christmas to Jack’s party?”

“Oh! Yes!”

“I’d look good in that.”

Un-naming

What does it feel like to watch them lose your name?

bandaide pull—licorice rope—
shoe laces undone & turning into pythons—

garbage disposal groaning—*does it hurt?*

weed-wacker wail—

unscrewed lightbulb—switch off—shutter slam

piano dropped from windowsill—
fresh maroon scab—

un-dry blood—

where does your name take refuge?

thinning soles of your black heels—
dark slugs beneath eyes—

smiles in pockets—

illegible & cursive

there are so many of you in these
photo albums—

so many handfuls of faces—let's séance
on the teal tile bathroom floor—

candles & incense—

climb smoke like fire escape

i'll grab onto the notion of your names—
weathered coin-faces—we turn green
in the alley together—

i don't want to rename you

i want you to know that i miss your name too—

does the space it left still hurt?

is it more like a gash or a rug burn?

gummy-worm skinned & blistering

not clean-cut or surgery—

*does your name breathe on the cold glass
of the window at night?*

Is it cold?

When death came for my grandfather

There are bruises that spread—more like peaches than like knees—the house couldn't hold anymore history.

Later in his seventies Pop-pop finally gave up his house on Farragut street.

He had prided himself in owning his own gun. He “held down the fort” so to say. It was the same house he had spent the latter part of his youth in—the house with the cold kitchen floors wearing the ghostly footprints of his dead mother & father. It was the house Freddy never saw but that wore his folded flag & bruised in every corner from his purple heart.

Pop-pop had been robbed a few times but now with his gold-handled wooden cane by the door he wasn't as stealthy to pick up his gun to intimidate any intruders. He never intended on firing—my father was the kind of person to hold a gun without bullets in it. He didn't even get to his cane the last time the place was robbed.

Dad had just moved with Mom to an old house in Fleetwood Pennsylvania & for all such compounding reasons Pop-pop re-entered his children's' lives by moving to the town over with Uncle Rich.

I remember a kiddie pool in the backyard & Pop-pop pouring water over my head with a plastic mug. I remember him keeping fruit snacks on top of the fridge & little packets of peanut butter crackers in his pantry. What I can remember about the house (before Rich & Dad renovated it) is that the floors were wood & the whole building felt precarious—I didn't like to walk in alone to use the bathroom—I asked Mom or Dad to hold my hand. The light in the windows always felt askew & the big staircase sat like a dark tunnel to the upper floors because it had no windows & a door at both ends.

What I wish I could know is what it was like to have a father come back.

What Dad & Uncle Rich don't talk much about is how after their mother died their father shrank away into a horizon man—working & living alone in house in Philadelphia.

When they tell me about visiting Pop-pop as boys they make it sound like everything made sense—like that was the logical course of action for a father to leave his sons with their aunts. From the outside I see a man struck by grief who couldn't pick himself up enough to hold onto them. I don't ask the memory of my grandfather to do that—but I think the story is more fraught with emotion that Rich or Dad let on. As I look at the ghost Rich & dad make of him he's a solid man—unwavering but I in these actions I see where he was movable—human.

Uncle Rich says that when he went to art school in the city that Pop-pop & him sometimes got lunch & that there was one place he & Pop-pop particularly enjoyed that looked out over the water—a seafood place. I see Rich cutting the side of hunk of fried flounder with his fork & dipping it in some whitish sauce across a small table from his father. They talk about mundane things—Pop-pop asking—

How's your girl? Did you see how the Phillies are doing? Did you notice it's been raining a lot for September?

Rich asking—

What are you ordering? Did you read the Inquirer?

There are subjects they don't navigate. Mom is one of them. She haunts all their interactions—pulling up a chair to the table in the little restaurant they have lunch at—

she orders something expensive to tease her husband—she shares fries with her son—all silently.

Dad has less stories about seeing his father but I'm not sure if that's because he doesn't talk about it or because he didn't visit much. I have asked him but Dad responds short—

We talked—we played chess—we went out—I met him at the station—

Nothing longer than a few sentences. I like to imagine their meetings weren't tense but perhaps just distant—aloof. A kind of thread cut that couldn't be mended.

I once asked Mom if Dad ever had a counselor or anything & she responded “he was an angry boy—that what Aunt Flo says and one time they tried to take him to see someone but he punched a hole in the dashboard of the car.”

This was of course after Priscilla passed away & he went to live with his three aunts while Pop-pop escaped to his city—

Dad as an eleven-year-old boy resolved to become the man of the household if his father wouldn't—angry & torn from the fabric of a world between two parents—he let all expectations for his father go.

Dad speaks of Pop-pop fondly now—but more like a character than like man he looked up to. More like a legend—a piece of folk lore—a jar of ashes in our attic.

Pop-pop arrived at his son's doorstep. As a kid I didn't see Rich & Dad trying to figure out how their aging father could slip back into their lives so simply & quietly.

Pop-pop & Dad shopped for antiques up the street—they talked about old telephones & type-writers & yearbooks to be framed the Fleetwood historical society.

His reincorporation into their worlds was clumsy & hesitant—without expectation but full of amusement.

Priscilla was sitting in the living room of this strange house she found her husband in—she scolded him for leaving them—after all these years she finally came out & told him that she knew he would leave & that's what hurt Pop-pop most of all—that she knew he couldn't hold onto everything without her.

Night at Pop-pop's house in Kutztown was heavy with her conversations—he would try to get her to dance—as the wind made the house groan & sometimes Rich would come into the room & find his father standing for no apparent reason as he attempted to get his wife to stand with him & hold each other like they had done nights in their house in Malvern.

When I was two—maybe earlier—a tornado dug a trail between Kutztown & Fleetwood—tossing houses from their foundations & tilling its own rows in the fields of corn.

In the house alone my grandfather awoke from a nap to all the doors & windows in the house closing & opening—a great orchestra of clamor—the bones of the house shaking out of their sockets & with the home my grandfather rung like a window chime.

Not as agile as he once was he tried to locate a visual source of all the commotion & the door to his bedroom slammed in his face—knocking him on his back & tossing his crane to the other side of the room—

Our Father Who Art In Heaven—

He started out of habit—his Greek Orthodox roots calling him to pray in the only way he had ever known how & he felt as if he were praying to her—not praying to God but to his wife to come there—to come there & tell him he could be forgiven—to let him go.

If death were to come for him at least let him be forgiven—let him go back & rewrite it all the way it was supposed to be—

He would buy his boys the house in Malvern & they would eat dinner on Sunday nights & the ghost of their mother would sometimes entertain them in the living room by rocking in a chair or paging through the paper in the morning—

They would go out to the movies & save a seat for her—he would be there to pick them up from school & some afternoons the Aunts would come over to babysit & he might even someday be able to learn from her & make pineapple upside down cake just like his sons liked—the way she did with the red cherries & canned dole pineapple rings.

He knew he could do that but he imagined it—lived it there in the rush of wind & the slapping of the house's body—he was sure the floor boards would soon enough be taken from beneath his feet & he would fall—fall far & heavy deep deep down where all father who leave their children go—

He did not pray for death not to take him—he prayed for understanding—to write an apology with the removal of his skeleton from his skin—

In the ruckus of the winds my father arrived to make sure his own father was alright because he had been in town at the hardware store at the time.

He opened the door to his father's room & found the man on the floor staring at the door to his bedroom—a man with suspenders & a striped shirt tucked in—a man who held him on Christmas mornings & taught him to fire a BB gun & took him to where the sky opened in Canada & taunt him how to tell if a snake was poisonous & who picked him up & sat him on his shoulders—

& Dad was eleven again & a man & Pop-pop was a boy with his own sons—broken in so many places—running away from the ghost of a woman whose love he mourned with his whole body—whose face lived terrifyingly in the eyes of his sons—

& Priscilla told him she could never not love him

& all the wind could never dislodge their memories

Dad says he held his own father there on the ground of the room & when the winds finally stopped shaking the house Pop-pop looked to his son & told him

I thought death had finally come for me.

Você vai voltar?

A letter,
I'd write words—all
kinds of words—
what kind of words
are worthy of letters?

I'll tell her
that I was thinking of the
way her body curves like
the high brass ceiling of 30th street station—
the way i saw her teeth
become these tall windows—
I'll thank her for the blush of mid-day sun—

a bird flew
out of her throat & I caught it

I'll tell her
the she came & went like a mosquito—
& that I still wear her bites like
rosary beads—

my whole-body itches
Hail Mary

I didn't think a memory
was something you
could wear—

Her
Goodnight
pulls on my sleeves

on this bench, we share
our knee bones

She said
Goodbye
only with her hair

today everyone's hair is brown like hers
I watched her shadow
feed a pigeon

undressed in a bathroom stall

I kissed my forearm
where she did the first night
we went back to her house
outside of Natal—
horse-hoof street plotting heavy
outside—

her father was a locked front door—

she opened the windows &
joked that I was going to try to escape—
asked
if I was going to replace her body
with a ship's bow—

I'll tell her we can make
this our cathedral—

kneel—ask
her to marry me with—with my
with my class ring—she loved
red stones—she said that—
she liked how dusk
lit them like matches—

Her finger grazed my lips when I tried to
Tell her for a third time that I loved
Her—that I knew—I knew
I *had to* love her

that
Was the only word I could find—

I didn't think a memory could
fall out on the tile floor
& sleep besides
you & coil in your chest like
a swallowed stone—

I'll be a rock—let the bodies in the
station smooth me—
water over my head—I'll
fit nice in her palm—

Dear Ana—
your body doesn't have
an address

& neither does mine
Dear Ana—
we could
haunt this station—

sleep backs against pillars—

we can live here & go back to
a hot night & the sound of an ocean
laughing—

Você vai voltar?
Are you coming back?
Você vai voltar?

I'll hang your name from the lights

Let's light candles

I used to get excited for power outages because we would have to light candles—the pine scented ones we got from the Christmas Bazaar raffle along with billy & I's tall white baptism candles —blue crosses melting down their torsos— cupped hands around soft warm flames— we flickered—

fire is so gentle

Rich taught me how to use his blue lighter at billy's sixth birthday party—thumb catching on metal—thin little candles bleeding blue onto bright green frosting—

we coaxed quiet trails of smoke—

Did those vapors reach god & does he have cinnamon scented candles?

When did you light candles?

Did you leave them unlit?

resting in silver holders on the dining room table—wicks licking steam off another tray of mashed potatoes—

there is a kind of warm reserved for candles—

i became an altar server first & foremost so that i could walk down the church aisles with handfuls of ember—the tongue of god—the language set aside for us to share—we all know what a candle means—

did you ever light one just for yourself?

alone on the end table by your bed—a prayer to saint Monica who is (like all of us, inevitably) a mother—she understands what candles are for—

this one is for you—for grandmothers & for the quiet resignation of our lives into wicks—where does God keep his match book?

sit with me on the aunt's dining room table—dangle feet off the side—

your light is a flicker of curtains—

come stay for dusk—haunt my tongue—

don't leave me, january
i want to be un-imagined or
at least at the kitchen table

58 beads.

on sundays we all go to church
i bring my blue rosary
coiled in my purse—bead on
bead clamor—
when my mind starts to wonder i count them
i never
remember what to pray
there's 58 beads &
1 cross
sometimes i talk to god & he doesn't talk back—
& i'm not sure yet if he's supposed to
i asked flo
& she said that she wouldn't
like it if god talked in her head
mary says of course god doesn't talk back
& joan says she wishes he would say something too
she says she doesn't
understand praying
& neither do i
mary has always had thick glasses
great big fish tank frames—
they make her smarter—
reflect television glow
from the Johnson's new set—
mother says we shouldn't be bothering
them all the time to watch but
i think the Johnson's like company
flo is nosy sometimes—i repeat what Mother says—
mind yourself & don't
worry about others
but i think she's like that because she
doesn't think she's very smart—
in grammar class
she spelled 'the' with a 'u'
i didn't want to laugh
mother says
i'm older so I have to help her—
that sisters
help sisters help sisters
joan is too small to be helped with most things
but she likes to pester jack—
& i think it's the funniest thing—
she put a tack on his
chair when he went up to the black board
& no one believed

it was her because she's so small
& so bright—curly hair & bows—
i saw her & i could
have said something
but she didn't mean
to hurt anything
i wanted to hear her laugh
joan laughs like a bag of marbles
hugs herself & closes her eyes—
on sundays everyone comes over & the adults ask me
what i do in school
& i tell them i do what
everyone does in school
& they laugh
& i don't know why that's funny—
i tell them i like the holidays because
the house smells like cinnamon
& i like listening to the radio—especially Mother's jazz
& i like setting the table
fold napkin—little fork
big fork—knife & spoon
on sundays we all go to church
mother & father
mary, flo, joan
& me
i count my 58 rosary beads
1, 2, 3, 4
& god hears

Green Lights

My favorite memory of my Aunt Joan is when we slept next to each other on a water bed in Cape May.

I was probably five or six. This was before Billy was even useful for adventures.

We all went down to Cape May over Easter. “We” meaning “the Gows” (Dad, Mom, Billy & Me) “The Aunts”, and “The Cousins.” We got a huge house together.

I don’t remember the things you should remember about vacations. I don’t remember being on the beach—the feel of warm sand—cool salt water foam— I know that I went to the beach I just don’t remember it.

I don’t remember the ice cream parlor Mom says we all went to—soft serve dripping on wrists—sprinkles overcrowding—biting waffle cone or handing Dad the last melty bit to finish—

I don’t even remember mini golf—picking the lime green ball like Rich says I always did—cool sensation of dipping my hands into cartoonish blue golf course ponds—

These are all memories Mom & Dad have given me over the years. I’ve heard them told back to me so many times I have begun to see them.

It’s funny because Mom & Dad always seem slightly frustrated when I don’t remember. They prod, “Really? You loved it.” Or “We spent *hours* there!”

I only *really* remember the house we stayed in.

I love & have always loved new spaces—tracing wallpaper lines—flicking on/off light switches—making a new home. Houses were my kind of adventure. I used to want to explore my friend’s houses—trying to find an excuse to pursue every single room when I would on play dates. I wanted to open people’s drawers & pull out their kitchen implements & see which ones Mom had & which ones were new—to inspect their shelves & ask who these people were in family pictures—to open windows & watch the room breathe with wind—

This beach house I’m thinking of had so many floors. Uncle Rich followed me up the stairs—my short legs lumbering each step like a monumental expedition. I think the other family members must have gone to the beach or the shops for the day. It was just Rich & me. At the make-shift home I played pretend with him—making believe the house was haunted—then that we were inside a museum that came to life at night—then I was a saber tooth tiger—a statue of a goddess—a self-playing piano. We laughed—broke this new home in with our play—

We only stayed one night but the memory feels longer. I might be stringing together memories of other beach houses—maybe I’ve constructed a massive new house to make space for every young recollection of I have of these vacations. How many houses fit inside a summer?

Maybe in this house little seven-year-old Sarah can teach five year old Sarah how to build a sand castle—how to eat a creamcicle on the porch—how to wrap a blanket around herself when the thunder storms roll in from the bay—how to wash the sand off her thighs in the wooden outdoor shower stall.

This night I had asked aunt Joan if I could sleep in her room. Mom & Dad had little Billy with them, so she agreed.

On the drive down, station wagon bulging with backpacks & suitcases, Mom told me Aunt Joan & I would share a “water bed.” I was immediately nervous & thrilled.

What did it “do”? What if it popped in the middle of the night? Where did the water come from?

Once we got there I unpacked my old-fashioned blue suitcase on the dresser—taking out my eight stuffed animals that could fit. There was a monkey with orange fur & a handful of beanie babies for good measure & of course there was my giant teddy bear so cleverly named ‘Beary’. They sat to keep vigil over our room. A chorus of saints.

I bounced cautiously on the water bed & felt the mattress sloshing. I didn’t trust it—I felt like a sail boat.

Aunt Joan came in with her roly suitcase. She had a stuffed animal too—it was a little red teddy bear that she kept around the house in King of Prussia—it had ‘July’ written in its foot.

“Is that her name?” I asked.

“No it’s just for my birthday—Ruby is my birth stone,” Joan said.

“I was born in July,” I said.

“Oh, then it’s yours too.”

She sat the little bear with the rest of my stuffed animals.

I thought aunt Joan was the most fun of all the Aunts. Still, I found so many things about her to be strange. She wore these stockings that looked like a second skin. I wondered what her “real” skin looked like beneath them. She said she couldn’t get her hair wet or the color would come out of it. Her skin was soft & wrinkly. Her kisses smelled like artificial roses (which I both liked & didn’t like). Her lipstick smeared & was super sticky when she kissed you. It was hard to rinse it off in the sink.

I had only ever slept next to Mom & Dad. I realized quickly that I would have to sleep next to Aunt Joan. I worried she’d roll over on me or maybe that she would snore weird. I wondered if she needed to take out her teeth & put them by the side of the bed like grandmothers did in cartoons.

When night came, I was preoccupied with my glow in the dark watch Uncle Rich got for me before the trip. I was absolutely entranced by the notion of being able to keep track of time like adults. Glow in the dark watches were incredibly fashionable for an approximately six-year-old child so, needless to say, I felt very *cool*. The watch also was supposedly safe under six feet of water—which I was nervous about because I didn’t know how much a foot was & I wasn’t sure if I would be under more than six feet of water in the ocean (I was determined to test it out).

I was disappointed because I had asked aunt Joan to tell bed time stories like Mom & Dad & Uncle Rich: she just stroked my hair & told me to go to sleep. She had calm & gentle voice that wasn’t very helpful for my hyper active mind.

I sat up in the water bed after a few minutes of attempting sleep. I got up and sat in the big open windows looking at the bay—flicking on & off my glow in the dark watch to see the time blaring at me. Electric time was thrilling—the first time I checked it was only ten—then eleven—twelve—time seemed to pour by & every now & again I would watch my aunt sleep—roll over—snore a little & lick her wrinkly lips. I thought it was funny that she was so pre-occupied in the morning with “putting on her face” because she looked the same with or without her make up to me.

Out the window there were boats in the man-made bay. It wasn’t the “real” ocean—it was a cut inlet so that more vacation houses could have their little docks to drop fishing lines out of.

To me the green lights looked like the eyes of a monster or a dragon or something supernatural from one of uncle rich's stories or a *GooseBumps* book Dad read me before bed. The lights frightened me when they would flicker & blink & the ships sometimes howled for each other.

I wanted to wake aunt Joan up like I would Mom & Dad when I was scared. I had no idea how she would react. I had learned so well how Mom or Dad responded to my night terrors. I started to wonder why she didn't tell any bed time stories like my parents. I wondered what she did when she was little & if anyone told her stories or what stories she had that she wasn't telling—I mused that maybe she was magic or a witch or both.

I crafted her stories—little Aunt Joan with the same poof of reddish-brown hair only smaller (like me). I saw her running around making brilliant mischief. Maybe she'd go "goosing" her mom & dad in the rear end like older Aunt Joan would do at family gatherings. Maybe little Joan would go swiping the last cookies from the box while no one was looking.

I whispered, "Aunt Joan are you awake?"

She rolled over & groaned a little & sat up.

"What are you doing over there?"

"Playing," I lied & picked up the red teddy bear & shaking it side-to-side as if that's how someone would play with it.

"You're playing with my teddy bear?" she joked.

"Oh, and mine too," I said.

She smiled. "Why don't you bring them to bed with us," she said.

I scooped up all the animals & dropped them on the bed with a little slosh of the water inside.

"What time is it?"

I proudly checked my watch & reported that it was past midnight. "The witching hour," I gasped. That was something Dad had used as a line in one of his bed time stories.

"It's just a time—nothing to a time," Aunt Joan said. "Some people are still up at midnight."

"Like witches?" I asked.

"Sometimes," she said.

"Aunt Joan why don't you have any stories?" I asked.

"Any stories?" she asked.

"When I asked for stories you just told me to go to bed."

"I'm not used to telling them. In the morning maybe. We should get some sleep so I can be ready to tell you some."

I agreed & bundled the blankets up next to her.

She fell asleep fast. She was a very light sleeper & I had seen.

I stayed up awhile devising stories about her younger self—smiling—telling myself I would draw them in my notebook the next day.

I couldn't put my finger on it back then, but, I had discovered that I knew very little about my aunt. I considered her "my favorite" and knew nothing about her life before knowing me. I didn't know what her favorite cake was or if she liked bagels & cream cheese or what she dreamed about or what job she had or how she got her hair to

change colors. I wanted a book about her—like the lives of the saint’s books my mom read to me—I wanted one for my aunt Joan so I could know everything.

In bed, next to her, I reached over & brushed against the soft skin of her arm—it felt like the belly of a toad. Out the window the eyes of sea monsters & dragons blared & growled at each other in the bay & I told them in a hushed voice that my aunt & I needed time to sleep so we could tell stories in the morning.

I never asked her in the morning—we went out to eat at a diner & I discovered the delicacy of egg & cheese breakfast sandwiches like uncle Rich ate.

I got older—my arms got longer—my knees turned into baseballs—my teeth grew in crooked like the roofs of beach houses—my upper lip fuzzy as a peach just like aunt Joan’s when she would kiss me & smear red lipstick—

Her memory poured into all our beach houses—into the aunt’s living room—into the pears from the tree in the backyard—into cupcake tins & bowl of pretzels—all away until she went as faintly as the moan of the ships outside the window of that beach house—

& I never remembered to ask her & now I make up her stories just like my six or so year old self sitting in a window & staring green eyed monsters lurking over the bay.



She would have loved you

“She would have loved you,” Aunt Flo says, nodding her head a little like she always does. She has kind of a nervous tick when she starts talking about anything emotional. She glanced down for a moment or two. I didn’t respond because I didn’t really know what to say other than nod in comforting agreement. “She was a writer you know?” Aunt Flo added, surveying me sitting at their little bar in the living room.

I smiled. “I know.”

I at least got to know Pop-pop even if it was only briefly. I can remember a mischievous kind of love from him—the kind of person who taps you on your opposite shoulder & chases you with the garden hose when it’s too hot to not be in a plastic kiddie pool anyway. Dad loves to tell stories about him—Dad used “Pop-pop” stories for bed time stories when he tried to get Billy & I to fall asleep.

I don’t have stories like that for my grandmother.

Dad doesn’t talk about her much. When he does it’s only glimmers of her in the background of other stories—her making him get rid of box turtles he hid in his dresser—her taking him & his brother to see Disney flicks at the local drive in theater. I never really get a full image of her—I guess that’s why I’m fascinated.

I lived with my aunts for the summer between freshman & sophomore year of college for several reasons, but the biggest two were that the Aunts needed someone to check in on them & I had a job in Colleeville work as a preschool teacher. Aunt Joan had passed away the year before. Her room was vacant. Of course, Mary & Flo were happy to have more company.

The Aunts loved when I would come home & tell them stories about the kids I watched. Their favorite was about this little boy who kept peeing on the fence. Mary would ask “How’s that boy who wets himself?”

I’d respond “At least he pees on the fence—not himself. He has good aim.”

Between these conversations was the first time The Aunts mentioned my grandmother had been a writer.

I had known she was a nurse. She was clearly the matriarch of her nuclear family. I knew snippets about the details of her death. She died of cancer. She knew she was going to die long before she told anyone else. Uncle Rich told she had kept it a secret for years. She made quiet arrangements for Rich & Dad to live with The Aunts and her mother. I had always wanted to ask Uncle Rich if he would have preferred to have known she was dying or if was better to be hit with the grief all at once.

The most detailed account Rich has ever given me of his mother is from a dream he had & continues to have. He’s sitting in a McDonalds & ordering a chicken nugget kid’s meal & he sits down in front of the ball pit with all the other kids playing & all of a sudden, his mom is there. He tells her she’s supposed to be dead & she just smiles & smiles & smiles & he says the dream always ends with him screaming at her & telling her she needs to go but she never goes—she just tries to hold him.

Ghosts get trapped on this side of the family—the stories roll into each other—details get blurry—ghosts never die easily.

The Aunts still talk about everyone like they’re alive & they always conclude a story about whatever distant relative with the phrase “You would have loved them” or “they would have loved you.” The aunt’s father died falling off a train working on the

railroad in Philly & Aunt Flo says, “Daddy loves” this or “Daddy keeps the blinds pulled on Sundays.”

I have a boundless admiration for my grandmother’s ghost—so I understand. I’ve inherited not wanting to talk about her death.

Her name was Priscilla, but apparently she hated that. She always went by Pris—which is funny because I never liked my birth name “Sarah.” It’s not that “Sarah” is a bad name it just has never felt like my name.

My aunt Mary says that Pris wrote poems in the margins of the newspaper when she would pick up the Inquirer in the morning—she would finish the crosswords then write in the margins.

I desperately wish they would have saved just one poem—just one crossword page.

I just wish I knew what she wanted to write about.

There’s so much to write about.

Priscilla was private about her writing—she didn’t share it much & it makes me wonder how many mothers & grandmothers & aunts are/were/will write & who we’ll never get to read. If you write I hope you share your poems with someone—I hope they keep them.

More than anything I wonder what made my grandmother start writing. She studied nursing in college & had always been a nurse but she had to have read some poetry to decide she wanted to write. I wonder who she shared her first poem with. If she ever crumpled up drafts scrawled on napkins or if she shaved them in the top drawer of her wooden desk.

Sometimes I have this thought that when she was writing a poem she might have thought about what her grandchildren would be like—like maybe my brothers & came out of an idea she had in a marginalia poem next to a crossword with empty blocks open for a word she would never find.

I know I’ll never really know my grandmother but I want to write about her because I won’t ever get to read what she wrote about herself. I want to figure out how & who she loved—what her favorite part of a morning was or if she liked to stay up late at night—what snacks she made & if she put strawberries on her ice cream like me.

Maybe she found me in a poem.

On the way home

My grandmother sits in the passenger seat while I drive back from my parents' house.

I sit at the breakfast bar by the kitchen. Mom sets dishes in the sink to soak. Billy lines up his army men on counter top. I wonder about what war they fight. Billy hums to himself a hymn or a jazz rift—I'm never sure.

Dad comes home late from work—sets his ragged Nikes on dining table. He rubs his feet a few minutes before going out to mow the lawn.

Sun drops like an egg yolk—runny & bleeding on eggshell shattered stars.

Stars are timid in Kutztown—they blush in street lights & headlights of cars scrawling themselves across the road. Time is different when I visit there. I don't feel comfortable. I feel like I should be younger. Like my hair should be longer. Like I should be wearing a yellow dress & a bowler hat & playing with Uncle Rich's acrylics.

"I should go," I say—after a ten-minute day goes by.

Mom scrolls on her iPhone at the kitchen table surrounded by a typhoon of bills & Billy's college mail.

"Mom—Mom?"

She blinks in screen light.

"Mom—I'm leaving."

"So soon?"

"It's late—It's eight o'clock already."

Billy slides down from one of the stool to lean in for a clumsy hug. I go over to Mom for one as well. So puts the phone for a second. Dad slips down stairs—brown bottle in his hand. He walks me out to my car like he always does. He doesn't see Priscilla sitting shot gun.

I tell him to put my backpack in the back seat—not the front.

He lingers there on the porch while I pull away. It's hard to leave Dad. Dad says he loves you with everything but words. That would be too easy. He always seems like he wishes he could drive me home himself. He holds a brown bottle on the porch—drops a bottle cap that clinks on the concrete.

I don't like to drive home in the dark but I did—clicking on the high beams as we turned left at Valero gas station to enter the meandering woods. She turned the overhead light on. I click it off again.

"I know it's dark—it makes me think of werewolves," I say.

Priscilla smirks & opens the window. She doesn't talk much. She wants to know how I drive from Kutztown. She puts her hand out the window—grabs a fist full of dull stars & offers some to me.

I take a few & put them in the glove box for later.

She points to note the street signs as they flash under headlights.

She's attentive—sits upright. Her body isn't used to driving. She feels every curve of the mountain roads—grips the edges of her seat when we reach the abrupt stop-sign before breaking onto highway. Thighs of the evergreens shield us from moon light.

We pass a house at a bend in the road. It has electric candles in the windows & it sits overlooking a rocky brook. Its roof is red.

"That's my favorite house. I don't know why but it's always been my favorite. Rich likes it too," I tell her. We slow down & catch a glimpse inside. There's a woman over a

sink—she doesn't notice us. She's wearing a green dress—I imagine her humming a hymn or a jazz rift.

Priscilla would have liked to live there too. She rolls down the window & the night sky comes in. The ceiling of the car fills with more vibrant stars—not timid stars—real bold bright stars.

“What'd you do that for?” I asked.

She puts her hand on my knee. I'm not used to being touched there.

We turn right near the Oley Dairy & I tell her about how Dad took Billy & I there. About the goats that ate animal crackers from your hands & the peacocks that were too beautiful to be men. She likes peacocks. Outside the Dryville Inn there's a woman smoking a cigarette—she watches our car turn.

I ask her if she still remembers how to drive home & she nods. It's the kind of thing that gets written into your body. I don't know road names but I know my body & I know how to drive home. She asks me to show her my body.

We drive between the two churches in the middle of the corn fields. The Lutherans on the right & the Protestants on the left. They both have stained glass windows that light up when our headlights ignite them.

She asks me if I've ever feel like stopping there & I tell her I always always always feel like stopping.

Past Yellow House she tells me that she remembers that place—but she doesn't know why. I tell her we had Aunt Joan's birthday there when she turned seventy. She asks how Aunt Joan got to be seventy. “Same way I got to be twenty-one.”

Priscilla tells me I can't be twenty-one.

We play eye spy even though it's hard in the dark. Priscilla spies something infinite. I know it's one of the stars on the ceiling of the car but I guess the stop sign in front of us because I want to play longer.

When It's my turn I tell, her I spy something bright. She guesses the headlights & I tell her she's right even though I was thinking of the cantaloupe rind moon smiling on us.

We pull into the Wawa before you get on the highway. It's the same Wawa I always stop at. I buy a root beer & she doesn't want a sip.

I tell her I like headlights—how I wish my eyes opened like that & she tells me that they do.

“Are you going to see my house—er—my dorm?”

She shakes her head. She's just coming for the ride. She just wants to know how to drive there.

“Are you going to the Aunts' house then?”

She says 'no'—she says she feels like she wants to keep driving & driving.

We pass a man walking on the side of the road. The cars moving past him make the edges of his flannel shirt dance in the rushed air. It's August & the breeze from cars is welcome. He is Pop-pop & we pretend not to notice him for tonight.

By the time, I reach my house my grandmother is asleep. I touch her lightly on the shoulder (because I'm not sure where I should touch her). Her eyes open. I tell her that if she comes next time I can tell her the rest of the way to get to my house.

“Are you sure you don't want to see inside?” I asked again.

She nods off again—her body is so heavy.

I open the window with the car still running & the stars seep back onto the black sky. The moon grin wider.

I open her door & sling her limp body over my shoulder. I know immediately where to take her.

Ouija

I believed in shadows more than I believed in God. I had a stone cross with the 'Our Father' carved into it but in the middle of the night I never felt like it was enough to ward off the ghosts shrugging their shoulders in the pipes of the house.

There is a lineage of believers I can trace from Uncle Rich & then to Priscilla.

I think a fascination for the supernatural is innate in us.

When I was seven a witch store popped up on Main Street in Kutztown next to Pop's Malt Shoppe. I gazed inside at rabbits' feet—tarot cards—incense—dragon statues—red wax figures. I begged Rich to take me in. Together we picked up rune etched candles—pentagrams—lunar charts. We didn't talk much about what we saw there. It seemed so natural—our rampant curiosity for the occult.

Priscilla was like that too.

I think for some Catholics the rift between these schemes of beliefs isn't as far as it would seem. The rituals of both are strangely similar. Repetition—imagery—transfiguration—wine to blood to water—bells rung—*blessed be & let it be done so that it harm no one--& with you spirit*—

I will never know from whom Priscilla got her Ouija board or her tarot cards. I see her searching for something. I see a chasm opening in her Catholicism—an emptiness—an insufficient answer.

Her first baby died at birth. Priscilla & Pop-pop named the baby Linda.

I see Priscilla wincing as she gets down to kneel. Adoration—the blessed sacrament on the altar. She feels nothing—she asks what she did wrong. She asks if there's any point in trying again. Silent incense burn. Her Mother holds her & tells her that it's all in God's will.

She stops on the way home from work on a side street in Norristown. He has passed "Fortune Teller" before. She has always thought about stopping.

She finds herself across a wooden table from a middle-aged woman in a long flowy dress—bandana pulling back her hair.

"It's all in the cards."

"What is?"

"What do you want to know?"

She leaves her own purple velvet sack of cards & a tiny booklet on learning to read.

She returns sporadically for a few months. She asks about the Ouija board on the counter & the woman sells it to her that day.

Alone in her room before Pop-pop gets home she sits there—feels wooden piece talking through her. She's not alone anymore. She has answers.

She does a celtic cross spread on the kitchen counter. The cups—the lovers—the coins. It's a good one. She's excited.

The next week she discovers she's pregnant again.

Maybe she's disturbed by the connection or maybe she's thankful. Maybe she thanks God at church & comes home to thank the cards. Maybe she doesn't see them as different. Maybe they aren't different.

They have both served their purpose. She keeps the cards in the top drawer of her dresser—the board underneath the sink.

She has Dad & life moves a little bit faster.

She doesn't have time for the cards anymore but she thinks about them. She thinks about them in church even.

I know the Aunts didn't know anything about Priscilla's dabbling but I have an inkling that Pop-pop must have.

Maybe they would both be sitting up one night—the baby finally off to sleep. She might say, “Do you believe in ghosts?”

“I um.. I don't see why not.”

“I just... I have to tell you something.”

“Shot.”

“I... I've gone to a psychic... I mean I've had a reading.”

“Oh...”

“I... I got cards from her & a board.”

“A board?”

“A Ouija board.”

He nods. “Alright.”

As her children grow up they take up more space in her life. The cards don't come out as much. There's church groups & her job as a nurse. There's no time to stop & ask questions of God or the shadows.

I'm fascinated though about how this side of us comes in & out of focus. For me, I go through eras of fascination. I also own tarot cards & know how to give readings. I have owned a Ouija board—my uncle too.

Priscilla introduced Rich to the Ouija board. I like to try to imagine how she would present the device to her two boys. How would she preface it? Would she tell them it was just a game?

On a board-game weather day I see her telling Bill & Rich to follow her to the cabinet. She pulls out the board—maybe wiping off dust.

A Parker Brothers Ouija board is quite the iconic device. Wooden board with the sun & the moon balancing either side. Black lettering sprawled across the plank & in the bottom corners were etched images of a fortune teller—her wild-enchanted hair floating around her— hands outstretched—caressing the surface of a crystal ball—

The boys might giggle & turned the board over. Priscilla turned the board right & with a mischievous grin explained to Billy & Rich, “Now you don't touch the piece—you just keep your fingers lightly over it.”

“Then how does it move?” Rich asked.

“I don't know,” Priscilla said.

“It's got magnets—that's what Dad says,” Billy said—picking up the box depicting an ominous cloaked figure.

“There's no magnets,” Priscilla said—brushing her fingers along the back.

“Then how would it move?”

“It's supposed to summon ghosts,” Priscilla said. “I don't know if I believe that or not, but we don't have another reason now do we—unless maybe we can move it with our own minds.”

“I want to try,” Rich said & scooted closer to the board on the floor of the living room.

“Wait!” Priscilla said. She stood up & turned off the lights. Soft grey beams make their way through the window. It drizzles outside—a meandering summer storm.

The three of them put their hands gently above the planchette.

“How does it start?” Rich asked.

“Hush,” Priscilla said calmly. “They’re just spirits.”

The three of them were silent & felt all their skin prickle. The room seemed to get colder.

Billy wanted to pull his hands away. He looked up—his mother’s eyes closed—he mirrored her—

It began to move—rapidly at first & then it slowed down.

“There it is! There it is!”

“Hush, ask it something!”

“What day is it?”

“That’s lame,” Rich said.

The piece dutifully hovered over each letter & number as it spelled out, “July 18th 1973”.

“How did it know that—I didn’t even remember the date,” Rich said.

“Me either,” Billy admitted.

“Something else!” his mother said.

“What is your name?”

The planchette hesitated as if it were thinking.

“L—I—N—D—A—” Rich spelled with it. “Linda?”

“Who’s Linda?”

Priscilla pulled her hands away from the board & the planchette clattered on the wood.

The boys surveyed her.

“Oh I was startled.” She scratched her head & looked down at the sun & moon on the board.

“Let’s do it again!” Rich insisted.

“I think I’ve had enough for today—you two go on.”

“Will you stay here—I want you to stay in the room,” Rich pleaded.

“I suppose.” She smiled—looking around. Priscilla stood & turned on the overhead light. “That’s better isn’t it?”

“Yeah let’s keep the light on,” Rich said.

Rich would come back to the Ouija board, years later after, Priscilla passed.

He’d sit alone on his bed room floor—a dark Friday night in August. I wouldn’t tell anyone at first—maybe Bill.

He would say it was just a game but he would be looking for something like his mother had been—a voice—a memory—an answer—

“Is that you Mom?”

Not Leaving

What kind of mother climbs into heaven?
Oh Billy, oh Rich—you are my afterlife
It's me—I'm here I'm stayin'

Your mother has no need for ascension
Close windows, Billy, shut your pocket knife
What kind of mother climbs into heaven?

I'll be there when red dusk comes to beckon
Your wind chime sung mother—haunting housewife
It's me—I'm here I'm stayin'

I spent all my white shoes on confession
I'll knot your stray socks—gather all this strife
What kind of mother climbs into heaven?

I'm at the back door—mother's not leavin'
I'll get to behold you unfold a life
It's me—I'm here I'm stayin'

I'm forehead kiss & Haily Mary blessing
but I'm not done—Richard's only seven
What kind of mother climbs into heaven?
It's me—I'm here I'm stayin'

Blood



Inherence

this is your inherence
Your father's knees—his
Edge-of-the-seat—
foot bouncing
into tomorrow—his
alarm clock ringing
walls—his
broken ribs—his
bottle cap rain—

“Sometimes I feel
like dying too”

“Why would you tell me that?”

this is your inherence
Your mother's edamame
knuckles—midnight snacks—
her oven—her shawls—
her belief in god—
her love for dusk—
her unfinished
nightstand chapter-book
her
curious taste—

this is your inherence
Your father's depression—
his laugh-away suicide notes
written in our windows—
his beer bottles
clattering driveways—

“Because
I'm like you—you know?”

“I know you are
I know you are”

this is your inherence
You mother's tragedy—
her back seat full of Wendy's
bags—her parking tickets—
her avalanche of kitchen table mail—
her fingers plucking

off green bean ends off—

this is your inherence
a parked jeep in the corn fields—
top-down—your father listening
to you—your father
hearing everything you mean
to say—his silence takes
up the back seat—his
hands gripping steering wheels
as if he could drive somewhere
away from all this—

all these inches of you
your body—
your dead skin—
your unanswered questions—

this is your father
rustling of corn
blinking of daylight firefly

“Is it just us then?”

In a yellow & white striped bikini

There's a picture of Aunt Flo in a tiny white & yellow striped bikini. She's only twenty or so—leaning up against a palm tree—ferns wild all around. Her hair is wavy & brown—eyes are closed in mid-laugh—one hand behind her head as if she were modeling for Vogue.

Inspecting the bikinied woman, I carefully turned over the glossy photograph & caressed the smooth back of the image in search of indication of who she was.

It took me a few moments to realize I was looking at aunt Flo.

Aunt Flo; the woman who sat downstairs in her recliner—matching mint-green slacks & turtle-neck combo—fidgeting with her clip-on white pearl earrings. The same Aunt Flo commenting on how much skin “young ladies” show on day time talk shows & the hem-lines of the cousin's pencil skirts at Joan's funeral.

Her face still has the same curves—her hooked nose & smooth pointy chin—not rounded like mine. She thinks her nose is too big.

I wonder what other insecurities she has about her body—when she looks in the mirror as an eight-or-so-old woman. Does she touch her wrinkles? The creases by her eyes & the corners of her lip-sticked mouth? Does she think about the texture her skin was when she was twenty-one?

Behind the picture of Flo in the bikini was another photograph of all the sisters (minus Priscilla) wearing sombreros—their bodies luminous—sun in the background—glowing apparitions.

“Where were you guys?” I asked—just taking the two photographs down to the living room where Mary was squinting at that morning's Inquirer. Flo was watching “The View”.

“Oh—that's from Mexico,” Flo said. She inspected the image of herself in bikini—shifting a little in the recliner—blinking before taking the photograph into her hand. It took her a moment or so of gazing before saying, “Oh—oh, don't look at that! Isn't that silly!”

She kept staring—dissecting the body displayed before her.

Maybe she thought about the heat of the sun on her skin or a lover who knew her hair brown & thick like that. Maybe she was still processing the suggestion that both these bodies had been hers—her soft knees without aches—without the blue metal cane leaning inside the front door.

Maybe she didn't remember taking the photo—this girl an audacious reminder of how many lives her has housed.

The ghost of this girl frozen in ink—her soul discordant with Aunt Flo—holding her there.

I hadn't thought she'd be ashamed or shocked of herself in a small bikini—I mean they're pretty banal to someone who's grown up in the 2000s where literally every beauty magazine has a photo-shopped woman in a bikini or bra & panties. I hadn't considered she might not have wanted to share that but when I look at images of myself even from like 2014 I get uncomfortable—I don't feel like the girl in my old pictures is the same person who inhabits my body now.

“Oh?” I said, reaching for the image. “Why?”

“I was very young,” she said—nodding. “Stupid.”

I like to think about what she meant by “young”—maybe a way of saying “I don’t know her anymore” or “I don’t think like her anymore.” I think so often we think of change as this subtle moment—this turn—as if there was one day where my Aunt Flo decided she didn’t want to be flirtatious or a day when she decided that women should dress more “conservatively”. She didn’t feel these changes—they grew in her & with her own body. The resurfacing of this image was so disquieting to her because it served as an artifact of the gradual changes of her body & herself.

Aunt Mary looked over the newspaper & whistled when she saw the picture we were talking about.

“Oh, stop it,” Flo said. She put up her hand like a blinder to shield her face & stare forward at the TV.

At first I judged her—wishing she would embrace this wild & free version of herself. But, that was only what I saw in the frame of an image—the story I had seen in it would not & could not be the same story she did. There are images of me from high school I wish would go away—on a boy’s arm at prom—a bouquet of roses in my hands—one homecoming dress I wore that neon & black—dramatic blue eye shadow—she just felt the same—that uneasy confrontation her own unstable identity.

“What did you do there?”

“Oh—you know we were young.”

Mary just laughed & turned the pages of the Sport’s section.

“Oh, come on—did you just like—take off from work?”

“Oh yeah—we had all sorts of trips. Mexico was Joan’s idea. I mean most were Joan’s idea. She really liked to travel. She traveled without us sometimes too. I wonder where all she went—Mary, do you know where Joan went?”

“I couldn’t keep track of her. Worried Mother to death.”

“But you ALL went to Mexico. What about Priscilla?”

“You mean your grandmother?” Flo asked. She always asks to clarify—as if there were some other Priscilla in my life? It’s odd—she always seems confused—uncertain as to why I would have interest or inquiry about someone who was long dead before I arrived—there is an ownership to her tone about her sister—the tone of her voice & her crossed arms conveying that she was *theirs*—to know.

“Yeah.”

“Oh, she had a husband & the boys.”

“So, it was THAT kind of vacation,” I teased.

“What?” Flo asked.

Mary chuckled.

I put the photographs down & went to get myself coffee.

Later in the day when it was just Mary sitting there she said to me in a hushed voice, “Flo bought that bathing suite down there—I don’t think she’d wear it around here. She loved vacation.”

“She looked stunning—all of you did.”

“Oh, not me,” Mary said—Flo & Joan were like that—I was just there for the tequila.”

“Tequila will mess you up,” I said.

Mary laughed. “You can’t tell me that. You drink tequila? How old are you?”

“I’m in college.”

I like how Aunt Mary doesn't treat me like I'm a little kid anymore. A lot times I can't get stories about of family members—even my parents because they still keep anything that's remotely risqué or PG-13 away from me. Aunt Mary has gotten so old that she doesn't really care what she says anymore. For example, when the Philadelphia Phillies won the World Series I still recall her shouting "They fucking won!"

After a little pause while she adjusted her thick glasses she said, "There were shows down there in Mexico."

"Shows?"

"You know dancing & whatever," she said & she took a sip of her luke warm decaf coffee. "That kind of dancing—for ladies to watch men. Not good."

That conversation was about the most details I could get. I really hope she means male exotic dancers—I don't really know why it's so exciting for me to think of them like that—I guess it fascinates me that people can be different—can change. Maybe Aunt Flo didn't actually mind seeing herself in a bikini but didn't want her nephew to see her in one—didn't want me to know that she was not always a woman with her hands folded in her lap—rosary beads in a pouch on the end table. We are also different versions of ourselves for different people.

I have this fantasy that Aunt Flo went back after I left to find the picture. Quiet alone in the attic-- greyish afternoon in the windows. Pressing the image to her chest when she found it—lifting it to her room where maybe she let herself fall into the scene: the three of them walking down some touristy street in Mexico City—all up & down there's carts brimming with cheap souvenir maracas & sombreros & each stand is headed by a local—stacking pesos in a lockbox on the cart.

Aunt Flo buys a white & yellow striped bikini after Joan talks her into it in the hotel gift shop.

"Oh I don't know Joan—it's small. It's tiny."

"We're in Mexico," Joan says & picks up the top & bottom of the bikini for her. "These're your size."

"Like this?" Flo asks as she makes a dramatic pose outside the hotel. Other girls are posing around the palm tree while their friends take pictures of them with their disposable cameras.

"Like you're in one of those girlie magazines," Mary says & laughs.

With her arm behind her head she smirks & Joan snaps the picture.

"Now me, now me," Joan says.

"Let's take one all together before we go to the beach—this camera's almost out."

"How many more are left?" Joan asks.

"Just one," Mary says.

& Aunt Flo's fingers tremble as she sits alone at her bedroom vanity—glancing up to see herself in the mirror.

The Neighbors

grew
un-mowed hills—
wild willows—
skeletons mansions—
brambles—summer leg hair

the neighbors
grew
bicycles—grew
hopscotch & sidewalk
corners—bus stops
& red bouncy balls

stop sign sprouting
on Caley road—
on General Scott Drive
on Spruce &
Washington—

The neighbors—
cook sweet sauces &
hot oil & their
dinners climb
insect-legged
through open
windows—

children lawn
sprawling—

the neighbors
drank lemonade
on porches—
left packages on
doorsteps—
grew hyacinth bushes—
tomato vines &
pumpkins—

The neighbors were
Protestants—
Accountants—
School teachers—

with children planting

pennies all the
way to Valley
Forge—
Grew deer bones—
Grew thicker & thicker
Tree trunks

The neighbors
Sleep in—
Leave lights on
in the living room
—windowsill
electric candles
Grew mailboxes full—

Grew house after house
After porch light, after
Sunday after
Clutter sky—after
Morning Inquirer
After train to 30th street—

495 Regimental Road—
the neighbors--
 vines entangling
with each brick—

their children's laughter—
their wind-chimes
their tall tall
sunset shadows
stretched
on pavement

The Rockettes

November. 1957.

Aunt Flo wishes she was a Radio City Rockette.

Joan & Priscilla sit on the carpet—Flo & Mary beside Mother on the sofa. They huddle around new television glow—a bond fire.

Static crinkle—Joan clicks on the set.

“Just in time,” Mother notes—television announces:

Presenting Wide Wide World.

Trumpets & fan fair flourish. Host, David Garroway poises on a stool. An animated image of earth rotates gently in the background.

“I wonder how they do that,” Flo says—black & white globe turning—spinning round & round again—she spins too—

“Shush dear,” Mother scolds.

Mr. Garroway, the host, knows the Connor girls well, so he leans in when he talks.

He tells them, “The greatest show in the world is right here in our own little New York—yes the big apple is bright today.”

“New York, oh, I’d like to go to New York,” Joan muses.

On the screen: lanky porcelain girls stretching—putting their legs up on bars. Arms forming archways—the architecture of their bodies—Ballerinas maybe? No! Bolder! More metallic & grand—

“Don’t the girls up the street take dance?” Mary asks.

“The Junipers,” Joan adds.

“Not like that,” Flo says. She sits un-blinking in the curves of their shadows.

Lovely short curly hair. Sealed envelope lips—pursed in coquettish smiles—legs—so so long—skyscraper legs—

There they are—standing in a line—kicking & kicking in perfect unison—their legs like some graceful machine—clock tower pendulums—they laugh—these girls laugh their legs higher & higher—

“My god how do they stretch like that?” Flo says.

December. 1958.

Cheeks red from the cold Flo stands by Mary, Joan, & Priscilla. They’re each wearing some combination of red, white & green. Mary has on her sleigh bell earrings. On the bus ride down each bump made them tinkle—sleighs bells coming—

“Did you have to wear those?” Joan asks.

“They’re festive.”

Flo keeps eyeing up the clusters of families in line ahead of them.

“It’s like we’re never getting in.”

“We have tickets Flo, it’ll just take time,” Mary says. She shakes her head to jingle the bells.

They go silent—looking down at their chilly toes—huddled—a pack of hotdogs—breath escaping them in wispy clouds never reaching sky—

“Mother would have froze to death,” Joan says.

Sister push closer together—Flo remember the nature special from national geographic—all the little penguins waddling on ice—so close together—braving tundra—

“Have you ever thought of dancing?” Flo asks.

Priscilla laughs.

“What?”

“Flo you trip just helping Mother carry Thanksgiving turkey to the table—I just can’t imagine you dancing. I mean—I’m not better. You saw what happened when I tried to dance at that freshman frolic—devastating.”

Once inside the cavernous hall, row 43, Flo watches their legs again.

This time in person is different—religious even.

It all seems more tangible. She notices one girl stumble a little in her pure white heels.

Flo closes her eyes. She taps her feet to the blaring brass around her—she imagines the trumpets & trombones as blubs blooming—pushing through the frosted earth—

There she stands—legs are nearly bare. She smirks. Around her hips white frills plume—she’s a cloud with legs—tall tall legs—there’s no runs in her panty hose so they paint her legs like a doll’s.

“Are you asleep Flo?” Mary whispers in the middle of the final number.

Thanksgiving. 1960.

Aunt Flo puts her leg up on the towel rack.

“Oh,” she winces—not used to pulling that muscle so far—nearly falls getting her leg down.

She sits on the toilet—lid down—pulls up her bathrobe to inspect her naked legs.

There’s little purplish veins creeping across them—blue ivy—dark plum spots—stretch marks making waves across each thigh—their ripples spreading up to her waist—she feels like a great big ugly lake.

She covers her legs again—not wanting to look—picks up pantyhose & pulls them on—one leg at a time—smooths out the wrinkles—runs fingers over soft second skin—

“Are you almost ready Flo? You’re going to miss the whole parade,” Joan says from outside the bathroom door.

“A minute!”

Flo takes another survey of her face in the foggy mirror. She touches her cheeks. She puckers her rosy lips—coat them again with a brilliant holly berry red—

“The Rockettes are on! The Rockettes are on!” Mother shouts from downstairs.

Flo drops the lipstick—hastily pulls on her dress long red holiday dress & breezes past Joan—zipper only half pulled up—

November. 1962.

“I would move to somewhere wild—maybe Paris,” Joan says. “I don’t need a husband if I can have adventures.”

“No one with a husband has adventures,” Flo says.

“Where would you go—where would you go if you hadn’t met Hank?” Joan says. She lights a cigarette with a matchbook she keeps tucked in her knee-high sock.

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“It’s just me and you—it doesn’t have to be serious—come on Flo there’s got to be something you’d want.”

“Will you promise not to tease me?”

Joan shrugs. “Of course not. I just told you I want to run away to Paris. You can’t really get more frivolous than that.”

“I know—it just seems silly. It’s silly really.”

“Well?” Joan blows smoke & waves the cloud away. Her pink lipstick stains the base of the cigarette.

“I would be a dancer.”

“Ohhhh.”

“No—not just a dancer—I would be a Rockette.”

Joan nods. She bites her lip—

“There see—you want to laugh. I knew you’d laugh.”

Thanksgiving. 2015.

“Have you ever gone to see them?”

“The Rockettes?” I ask.

“Yeah—down at Radio City.”

“I’ve passed by the hall. I was going to poetry reading.”

“They were on this morning. The Rockettes. The music was the same as—same as it was when we went to see them. There they were on a Christmas wreath float. They looked like holly—little holly berries. Can you believe how they do it? Move like that—oh if I moved like that I would break.”

“Oh, we were watching the dog show so we didn’t see the whole parade.”

“There’s a dog show? You know you should really go up to see them. If you ever do—just tell me. I’ll get your tickets—take that girlfriend of yours—what’s her name again?”

“My roommate? Paige?”

“Yeah she’d like it too—It’s something you need to see. For any girl to see—it’s so wonderful. Let me get you tickets.”

The Gift of Gab

Chestnut brown hair flailing—wind tousles Joan’s hair. She tucks a strand behind her ears; crosses her arms. Hairs on her neck prickle.

“It’s not real,” she says to Mary as they stand, dwarfed by Blarney castle. Stone walls like a medieval fantasy—she feels like she’s stumbled into a pop-up book.

“Just think—they made that without big trucks.”

Joan nods.

A line of tourists pours out around the base of the castle. Moms & Dads in “Kiss me I’m Irish” sweaters. Kids laugh & brandish fake swords—dueling on the green.

“Who lived there?”

Mary shrugs, “Blarney something.”

“I’m sure they’ll tell us,” Flo adds.

“The kiss gives you the gift of ‘gab!’” The guide at the entrance to the castle explains in her heavy Irish accent. “Legend has it old Cormac McCarthy pleaded to the Clíodhna for help and she told McCarthy to give a kiss to the first stone he saw in the morning—the blarney stone! He got out of his trouble with the gift of ‘gab’—the power to deceive with grace—without offending.”

Joan laughs. “That’s why we’re kissing a stone?”

“It’s tradition,” Flo says as they climb stair by stair. Everyone’s voices reverberate through the skeleton of the castle—decades of echoes—ghosts still lingering.

“Yes, tradition.”

“Pris always wanted to go,” Mary says.

Everyone is quiet. They move with the crowd—glancing down at their feet.

Joan is the last to kneel at the ledge.

The guide at the top is an older man in a newsboy cap. He beams at her.

“Now I’m going to hold your waist while you lean down and give the old stone a peck. Give it two for me, why don’t you?”

With the man’s course fingers gripping her torso Joan bends back. She stares at the smooth surface of the whitish limestone. She hesitates. She closes her eyes. The surface of the stone, wet like cold lips.

Morning is a handful of dew.

Rich wakes up in bed next to Evan, the boy from Wales.

He has a satchel with some crackers & a roll of bread. Cork lays shirtless in front of the sky—blue against lush green fields.

He eats blood pudding & leftover potato farl from the night before. Drinks a cup of tea. The family had lent him & the other travelers a room for the night. An old couple—Clare, the wife, lingering in front of a stove. John, the husband, putting peat blocks in the fireplace.

“My family is from Ireland—came over through Ellis Island in New York,” Rich says.

“You don’t say—so you ARE family,” Clare teases.

They look at Evan who shrugs & says, “I’m enemy—born raised in England. South Wales.”

Everyone laughs.

“I don’t know anything though—I don’t even know my family members names from here.”

“What’s your last name?”

“Gow... er.. Connor—well my last name is ‘Gow’ but I’m a ‘Connor’.”

“I see,” John says—poking at the crackling fire.

“There’s more Connors than you could ever count,” Clare teases. “Definitely Irish though. It’s in your blood.”

“Maybe someday I’ll ask more about them—maybe my aunts know. I think my mother would know—she always wanted to come here.”

He chews a moment—sausage caught in between his teeth.

“Well you should ask her—mothers always know best.”

“Well did it work?” Mary asks, sitting her Guinness down on the wooden bar.

“What?”

“The Blarney stone!”

Flo laughs.

Irish folk music fills the bar from a tape player on the counter.

“I think I’m pretty sly,” Joan muses.

“Go on what would you get if you could trick anyone into anything?” Flo asks.

“Oh, Joan can already do that with her looks,” Mary adds.

Joan rolls her eyes.

She stares at her glass.

She thinks to herself that she would trick God—she would trick God into trading places with Priscilla.

She swallows a gulp of beer.

“I’d get us another round,” Joan says.

Alone at the foot of the castle Rich stares at each individual stone—carefully set in the body of Blarney castle.

He walked all the way there from Cork a few miles up.

Midday—the sun glimpses at him through grey cloud cover.

Everyone’s voices mix together once he gets inside. He swears he hears his aunts talking—laughing. He knows he’s there alone. He hears his mother—he hears his mother telling him a story about Blarney castle & old Cormac McCarthy praying to a Celtic Goddess—kissing the first stone he saw in the morning.

The surface of the stone is smooth on his lips. It reminds him of a girl he loved. It reminds him of soft cheeks. It reminds him of the palms of his mother’s hands.”

He hears his mother say, “And when you’re old enough we’ll all go to Ireland and give the Blarney stone a kiss—I’m sure it’s not as great as it sounds but it’ll be fun and then we’ll all have the gift of gab and we can trick each other into anything.”

Morning is a handful of dew.

A gentle wind brushes Cormac’s short chestnut brown hair. He rolls up his pant legs to walk along the rocky shoreline. He bends down on his knees.

Whispers a prayer.

Leans down and kisses a stone.

Fabric

Rich & i fix your old sewing machine—
 off-white neck & silver hands—
 eyes turning to catch red thread—

dad gets me thimbles—

i love home economics class even though i don't know what economics means—the
sterile white-tile class room—white washing machines & dryers—white dishwasher—
sewing machines humming as the 7th grade boys scoff & refuse to sew—

they're scared of becoming women—

i crave the steady pull—needle dipping—stretch—tug—cloth mouth stitching shut—what
words were there on the other side?

this is the first time i find my grandmother's mouth—a line never finished—practicing
sewing on printer paper—

we make draw-string bags—

i come afterschool to sew more rows—i don't make anything—
i take the most colorful scrap fabrics—patience practicing—

the peddle—planting black thread in a field of mauve—lavender print meadow—
when will we take root?

did you learn to sew from your mother? how old were you? how many times did you
embroider
your lips—what hymns did you hum?

Rich & i fix your old sewing machine—
 she has an off white neck & silver hands—
 eye turning to catch red thread

impatient
 we get our supplies from the dollar store
 on Sunday night when we should both be on the sofa—

him & i take turns threading the bobbin until finally string catches—
we sit discovering the slight tremors of our hands—prick fingers on the needle—

don't tell mom—
don't tell mom— i'm not scared of blood & i don't want to work with thimbles—

we discover fabric—we're ambitious—we'll make kimonos & capes

i hide in the wracks at Joanne Fabrics & he tells me we can make anything—
brush of pink silk & red superhero pleather—

when you were eleven did you want to sew extravagantly? did you imagine patterns of
billowing pleats & vibrant indigo hems?

did you immerse your needles
in the ceiling—pull in your waist—become duchess & deacon—

we need your help—it's past our bed time & the light
above the presser foot is dim—orangish & glowing

we will never end up making any clothing but we will
have fabric in the closet—

folded into squares & some
nights i'll wander over & wrap myself—feel the caress of an apron
you once made—pins still waiting—
i put them in my mouth
slim cigarettes or knives—

Rich & i fix your old sewing machine—
She has an off-white neck & silver hands—
eye turning to catch red thread

Teddy

Growing up, I had boring pets: tired carnival goldfish—the occasional water-bond frog—mucky fish tank creatures—fragile & fleeting. Their vagabond ghosts buried in shoe boxes & dumped in the creek.

Before bed I would ask Dad about his childhood pets and he swayed back & forth, easy in the wooden rocking chair. He clutched a green bottle of Pilsner pale lager—whistling to call their spirits from backyards & bowers.

Barn owls trying to roost in the trees painted on my bedroom walls. Pop-Pop rescued them from his days working for the parks service. The birds lived in the family's shed & Dad took care of them.

Crouching down in his blue jeans & red t-shirt Dad opened the lid to a jar. He'd snatched up a mouse in from the basement to bring to them—let the rodent free into the cage for the owls to scuffle over—their wings beating & hurling gusts—these tiny Gods of air. He laughed at the brush of their feathers on his forearm.

When they settled down they returned to the back corner of the cage again. The parchment light of dusk unfurled through the slats in the wood. The little windows near the roof of the shed leaked a dull luminance.

Dad imagined the owls nesting there in the roof—coming back to visit him as they got older—laying eggs year after year. Dad would grow taller & they would molt & their wings would engulf the sky & the world would be the soft color of dusk & white spotted feathers.

Dad didn't want to let them go but Pop-Pop assured him that it was the right & only thing there was left to do with two adult barn owls living in a tiny suburban shed. Dad was gentle. Listened to them. Never reached towards them. He let those owls exist.

The next day Pop-Pop walked out to the shed with him.

"It's been a month almost—we can't keep them like this—they're big enough and they'll fly away and when you see an owl on a summer night you can know it might even be them."

"You don't think they'll stay in the shed and make nests?" Dad asked.

Pop-Pop mused & stood up from couching as he inspected the big cage—shaking barn owls inside.

"You never know."

I never asked Dad about letting them go but he always finished the story by pausing & turning towards my night light, remarking something about having wished he could have kept them.

"My dad was right though. He was."

The owls make shadows on the carpet—they move on & out the cracked window.

One night I asked if they ever had "normal" animals. Dad they had a dog "the size of a freaking horse" for two days. In Dad's stories his mom was always the one goading her husband into releasing animals back into the wild. "She was totally against snakes," Dad remarked. & yet somehow a Saint Bernard was an interloper in the Gow household.

"It was her friend's" Dad explained. I think more than anything it speaks to the kind of person my grandmother was—it wasn't the dog but the connection to someone who was important in her life—a girl she'd gone to nursing school with who had gotten married & was moving away.

Around the time the dog interloped in the God household my grandmother learned she was dying from breast cancer. The dog would likely outlive her.

Or maybe she didn't think like that—maybe she was a dog person who was excited by the idea of an animal with fur instead of scales or feather flocking through her house in Malvern.

The dog's name was "Teddy."

Pop-pop put his hands on his hips and nodded, looking at the Saint Bernard panting in the driveway.

Seated, the dog's head came to above his waist.

"We can't just settle on a nice little garter snake," Pop-pop teased, tilting his head.

Priscilla ignored him, attempting to get the dog to come forward.

The creature was immovable against its own will.

Wide-eyed, Dad & Rich stared at the creature. For some reason the nomadic pets they were accustomed to were so much more tangible than this beast dribbling saliva onto the hot asphalt.

"Teddy," she said, making an overly-excited & dramatic hand-motion.

"Is it gonna eat us?" Rich asked.

"Can I walk it? Let me try," Dad asked.

Bill laughed & clipped on the leash. "Maybe if we get it inside but I think the thing will drag you around the block—Pris this is really something—you gotta know I love you."

"You knew Patty—you know if it doesn't work out it's fine I just thought it would be rude to you know—not even try," she said, watching her husband finally get the beast started towards the house.

"I like him," Pop-pop said. "He's got spunk."

The dog's stationary period was brief because once inside he started into a gallop—sliding on the carpets in the living room & coasting into kitchen where it's nails clinked on the tile-floor. It tripped briefly & stood up—ears erect at the screen door closing behind the family.

"I only told her we'd try."

"He's a real golden boy isn't he. It's all your call—you tell me when."

"When?"

"When you're done trying," he said.

"It could work—I mean it could work and then later in the summer Barb could come by with her new husband and we could have a nice time all together—a cook out maybe."

Rich scurried into the living room mumbling something about his lunch & behind him Dad followed.

"Teddy ate our sandwiches! He ate them all like a vacuum!" Dad boasted. "He's a machine!"

Pop-pop patted his wife on the shoulder.

The night continued as such with a scattered symphony of broken picture frames & cookies swiped from the boys hands. Dad & Rich went up to bed & in the living room Pris flopped on the coach—the dog still pacing.

"Teddy... Teddy here—here do you want to sit with me? Keep me company?"

Teddy perked his ears & turned around to face her & in the process toppled over a vase with his tail—a puddle of drool oozing onto the carpet.

“Oh Teddy.”

Her husband leaned in the doorframe.

“Are you talking to it?”

“Just trying to get him to settle down.”

Pop-pop came to sit next to her.

“You know I know you want something for them—“

“It was Patty’s—she loved that dog,” Pris said—looking up at the ceiling & noticing there was a little spot where the rain browned the ceiling tiles.

“Would you look at that,” she said. “The ceiling is caving in on us,” she half-laughed.

“It’s fine—I saw it I’m gonna fix it this weekend.”

“He might settle down,” she said—looking at the dog—still making his round in the living room.

“He’ll run away with Rich—eat him for breakfast if we don’t feed him enough,” he laughed.

“Billy could walk him—you know how he is—I saw him with those turtles—he’s really gentle—you know he’s growing up he’s so patient sometimes. You know he went to the store with me and he just stayed by the cart—didn’t even ask for anything he was just looking around and taking everything in—he’s getting older. He could take care of it.”

“It’ll be home alone during their school day Pris.”

“I can let him out.”

“You’ll come all the way back from the hospital? For the dog?”

She inhaled & exhaled. “I just—I feel like I’ll have lost.”

“Lost?”

“I mean—we never had pets before and we can’t even take care of it.”

“It’s a horse Pris—it’s a god damn horse—that’s by no means a dog.”

In a tiny leap, Teddy sprung onto the coffee table, knocking over her short glass of ice water.

She flinched back & stifled a shriek.

“Damn thing couldn’t just behave.”

“He’s in a weird place,” Bill said. “I don’t blame him—new family—small house.”

“You know—I just thought it would be good for everyone.”

“You think he’ll work out well with your sisters.” He paused a moment & imitated Flo screaming at the sight of the thing.

Pris laughed until she started tearing up.

“I’ll sleep on it. Give him the night,” she said.

“Long as you need,” he said. “But... I’m hoping we’ll have picture frames left after he’s done with us.”

He kissed her cheek & walked up to bed.

She rested her head on the arm of the sofa.

“And I thought Billy was bad when he was little... you certainly are good at breaking things.... Teddy? Teddy! Teddy are you going to be leaving us then? Are you going to behave?” she asked, almost imploring the dog.

Teddy came over & rested its big meaty head on her thigh panting. He licked her elbow emphatically.

Looking around to see if her husband was still up, she permitted Teddy to climb up with its whole body on the couch. He rested against her.



Dance!

Billy flicked off the TV as a *Shashta Rootbeer* commercial popped up.

“Hey! There might have been another *Gunsmoke* on!” Rich whined & stood up from the sofa.

“Hold on I have an idea,” Billy said as he darted upstairs to his room.

Among army men lined up for battle & a few tin racing cars Billy picked up his Daisy Powerline Model BB gun from the closet. Pop-Pop had put a lock on it so that he couldn’t mess around with it while he wasn’t home. It was the only way Priscilla would allow Pop-Pop to get him one.

Billy had figured out that if you tugged the lock right that the gun still fired.

In his room, he pretended to take aim at some bandits & poised himself in a ready stance. Slinging the gun over his shoulder he bounded back downstairs to Rich who was still standing where he was told to wait.

Rich knew something regrettable was probably going to ensue but he had learned it was better to just let things unfold rather than try to stop them.

“Oh, what do you have that for?” Rich asked.

“We can play real cowboys!” Billy said—aiming the gun at Rich & pretending like he was going to shoot.

Rich put his hands up—sheltering his face.

Billy punched him playfully on the arm. “Calm down it’s locked—the trigger doesn’t work like that—I’m just playing.”

“I’ve seen you fire it while it’s locked.”

“Yeah but I only do that so I can target practice out back. I think we should do that scene when he makes the robbers dance—you know the one?”

Rich was getting more uneasy. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Yeah... I know the one. I don’t want to be the robbers though.”

“Oh no see we’re going to do it fair this time,” he explained. “You go and then I go.”

“I guess I go first--” Rich said but before he could get the words out Bill shouted, “Dance!” & fired the BB gun at Rich’s feet. Rich’s reflexes being nowhere near the make-believe logistics of TV westerns, he had no time to jump before the BB pellet bounced off the wood floor & collided directly with his big toe. Rich shrieked & fell with a thud to the hardwood floor.

“Ah shit!” Billy said & dropped the BB gun. “Oh, damn it Rich! Are you hurt?”

Rich just cried & remained coiled up in a ball—clutching his toe.

By the time, he eventually quieted down the front door swung open to reveal the tall & sturdy silhouette of their mother.

There was no talking his way out of this—Rich still sniffing on the floor—the BB gun still warm—incriminating evidence indeed—

“Bill go to your room until dad gets home,” Mom instructed. She scooped Rich up to set him on the kitchen counter. He sat there while she put away some groceries she had picked up on the way & before she was even done he stopped crying.

Rich waddled back over to flick the TV on & return to his cozy perch in the living room. His mother sat next to him & stroked his curly black hair. She kissed his forehead.

“Billy’s good at taking you for a ride isn’t he?”

Rich nodded.

“You remind him next time that he’s your big brother & that he’s got to look out for you. That’s what brothers do.”

She wiped off a tear with the back of her hand & sniffled.

“Are you okay mom?”

“Yes yes honey,” she said.

The street lamps came in the kitchen windows & Priscilla sat at the breakfast table—picking up a leftover dinner roll & spreading a sliver of butter on it.

Her husband walked in all ruffled with dirt from a day of cutting down trees.

There was saw dust on his shirt.

“You’ll never guess what Billy did,” she said—with her mouth full.

“What?” he asked, sitting down next to her & swiping a piece of her roll.

“He told Rich to dance & then shot him in the toe.”

Her husband bit his lip hard to try to not laugh.

Priscilla smiled too & shook her head. “You can’t laugh at that—he shouldn’t tease him.”

“It’s just boys—let them toy with each other—they’re just normal boys.”

There was a quiet that snuck over them.

“I just... I just want him to support Rich you know—he needs Bill & Bill needs Rich.”

The butter knife clinked as she sat it on the plate.

“When I’m gone I think they just—they just—that’s who they’ll have.”

“Don’t you dare say that—you can’t talk like that.”

“Bill I know what’s going on. We know what’s going on—we need to help them—help them be okay—“

“Be okay? Everything’s going to be okay Pris—no one is going anywhere—especially you. Don’t listen to the doctors—they don’t know you—they don’t know us. They don’t know anything.”

“Bill it’s not me—it’s just what happens to people with cancer—you can’t just. You can’t.”

She set down the rest of the roll & stood up.

“Pris come back come on—do you want me to give him the belt or something? I can do whatever you think we should do.”

She shook her head. He grabbed her by the shoulders.

“Pris—what do you want me to say?”

“Tell me it will be okay—tell me they’ll be okay.”

He held her there a moment & pulled her closer.

He whispered, “I bet they’ll be better than the living room floor—I bet that left a hell of a dent.”

Through tears she giggled & wiped her face with a dinner napkin.

“You don’t have to give him the belt—just talk to him. Talk to him nicely—gently.”

Hold on Tighter

June's heavy cool air poured in cracked car-windows the further Pop-pop & Dad drove north. Onward—swallowed by the massiveness of Ontario Dad dozed off—remembering brief interludes of highway & then deep thick forests. They would drive out into the woods & look for animals—deer & moose & turkeys. Dad says that there is nothing more frightening than a moose. Pop-Pop never took him hunting with guns—they were a different type of hunter—they were collecting images & memories & sometimes hunks of fern & nautilus fossils. Over the years, Pop-Pop had mapped up secret rivers where they could collect their own hunks of pre-history. I don't know how he would come across that information, but if anyone would know Pop-Pop would—I imagine he would make the most interesting cartographer—a man of tangled thread directions.

Their landing spot was always the ranch house of Pop-pop's "friend from the war." Off the grid. A radio tower jutting from the backyard. Barn full of ducks. Slightly tilted trailer for Pop-pop & Dad to sleep in.

"Oh the stars," Dad says. "The stars that backyard." Lights of the barn turned off. Murmur of insects.

Every once & awhile when Billy & Dad & I are outside in our backyard we'll look at the stars & try to find constellations. Dad knows all about them from Pop-Pop. Pop-pop spent those laden June nights connecting the dots for his son—plucking the big dipper from the sky to eat canned chicken noodle soup from their off-kilter mobile home. When everything is quiet, Dad will tell me & Billy that it's not really a stary night. In the middle of the night, somewhere in the belly of Ontario's forests, Pop-pop fullled over. Dad woke up & they both sat on the back bumper of the station wagon. He'll tell us how he saw all the stars there were to see—no glow of street light—no neon 'Open' signs to cut into the blackness —there was only the light off the moon—full-bellied & laughing—mouth full of stars—

& standing there the three of us occasionally Pop-Pop will show up & he'll show us where Ursa Major & Ursa Minor are because those are the ones we always forget. Orion's belt is easy—holding up the giant space man's pants. We use the dippers to scoop light out of the hem of skyline—pretending that we don't live so close to town.

Gow family's trips were an expedition on the open road—always in the family ford station wagon. The car boasted classic wooden sides—a shoe box pushed out onto a glorious labyrinth of asphalt. In the back seat they would spread out blankets & him & Rich would lay there & play with toys while the Gows threaded themselves into the growing needlework of American highways & back roads. On their bellies the boys would watch as the road spilled over hills—cascading like a giant black snake hungry for state lines & gas station stops—

Together they stayed in dangling motels with dusty bibles slapped onto the end tables—flopped on creaky beds with drab bed sheets & itchy pillows—aired out their sweaty traveler's feet & slept heavy—filled pockets with tiny shampoos & soap bars from the bathrooms.

Once there was a little creek near their hotel somewhere along the waistline of America—maybe Oklahoma or Arkansas. While the rest of the family was resting up & getting ready to go out to dinner that Dad took his own little trek there & discovered a

pond full of more painted turtles than he had ever seen in one place. They bathed in the late-day sun—bobbing on logs & poking their noses out of the water. He knew how to pick them up by their back legs—just like his father had showed him. He took a cardboard box from the hotel garbage & filled it with as many turtles as would fit inside—a little herd lumbering on top of each other. Pleased with himself he returned to the room & looking for a place best to store the new pets he thought he would house them in the wooden drawers of his parent’s temporary dresser. They packed light & never liked to fill up the wardrobes at hotels. They were only stopping by for a day or two.

The Gows were a family in motion—a process of coming & leaving. The Gows were an act of discovering.

Dad got ready quick for dinner. The turtles scurried out of his mind till that night Priscilla woke with a scream at the sound of scratching coming from her sock drawer.

“Bill—Bill will you open it? It’s got to be some creature that snuck in through the window,” she whispered in the darkness of the room. Light spilled in only from the street lamps in the hotel parking lot.

Dad woke up & immediately recalled his stowaways.

“Turtles?” Pop-Pop stated—flashlight pointed in the drawer.

He made Dad get up & let them go outside immediately even though it was the middle of the night. In the shadowy room, Rich moaned about being woken up & eventually the family got back to sleep.

Carlsbad Caverns sought to swallow the Gows. She had waited nine-states away in New Mexico—sat coiled in the pelvis of the Guadalupe mountains—rattlesnake tail jangling—a mouth gaping into a world of only night. She brandished stalactite & stalagmite teeth against the entrance of visitors.

Desert roads could have made them believe the earth was flat. Tufts of brush decorated their drive. Occasionally wind danced—blowing sand & dust across the windshield.

A cathedral—a stadium—this cave gasping—

They began to see National Park signs.

Pop-pop pointed each out—10 miles to Carlsbad—5 miles—1 mile—next turn.

At dusk the tangerine sky was clouded by the black bodies—bats performing a symphony of flight. Visitors watched, congregating outside in the dry desert heat. Standing there Priscilla pretended not to be frightened of the rumor that a bat could get caught in your hair & she leaned her head on the shoulder of her husband. Her two boys saw the stream of bats escaping from the caverns like a jagged cloud of black smoke.

The next day they’d take a tour alongside other families driving on the tendons of America. Dad—being the bold sibling—would walk ahead of the rest of the family like a pack leader—as if he were giving the tour. Rich would walk between Pop-Pop & Priscilla & individually they would all turn outwards—feel the rocks gnawing them deeper & deeper into an underground sky. The guide would tell everyone to stop & the families would look concerned & Dad would pretend to not be worried. The tour would explain he was going to turn out the light just to show them all & it would be the darkest moment Dad would ever witness. He stood there & instinctively grabbed the hand of his own father while Rich clutched at the hem of his mother’s plaid dress.

“Now if you got lost in here you could wander for days and never cross paths with a tour group—we might not ever find you,” the tour guide teased—his voice carrying on into the depths.

They each imagined themselves wandering in darkness—calling out & having each of their words eaten by absolute black. They held on a little tighter to each other than they had before—

Closing his eyes Dad imagined the stars from Ontario coming to hide under the black tongues of the cave—that maybe during the day while the stars wait to climb up into the sky that they would rest in these caverns— he imaged if you got lost that maybe all alone they would show themselves. The stars would tell him that they remembered him from the border—between tall evergreen trees—sharing silence on the bumper of the station wagon—

There is nothing to see after you witness such darkness. Each held a piece of that void with them tucked in their pockets.

In their hotel room in Carlsbad no one slept. The night was incomparable to the inside of the caves.

Years later in 1972, after their mother passed & their father moved away from them—Dad & Rich would go on vacation with the Aunts to Stone Harbor every year. Sometimes in the dusk of their hotel rooms they would both remember the cave. They’d remember holding hands—they’d remember holding on tighter & tighter & tighter to each other.

Gas Station Lights

"I know I just really—I just really have to go in. Peggy is sick so there's no one on the floor. I can make the reservation next time. I know it's a nice place—you've been wanting to go."

"No this is fine Pris....Let me pick you up from work then—when you're done. I can make that work."

"It'll be late Bill. Late—like three."

"You get done at three in the morning?"

"I don't usually. I just have to work a double or there won't be anyone to cover. I really need to. Being a nurse isn't the kind of job you can just—"

"Let me pick you up when you're done then."

"At three in the morning?" Priscilla leaned up against the wall of the break room—tan phone in her hand. She twirled the cord.

"I mean why not?"

"What kind of scene would that make?" Two nurses' aids came in with their brown bagged lunches and Pris sat upright. She smiled brightly. They'd tease her if they knew she was talking to her boyfriend.

"What kind of scene is there to make at three in morning at a hospital? Is there something you're not telling me about that place?" he joked.

She sighed. "I have my car here—what am I supposed to do with it?"

"Leave it there—I'll take you tomorrow too."

"Oh, so am I going home with you then?" she teased—now almost a whisper. The other girls scrutinized her from an adjacent round table.

"Oh—I didn't mean."

"I know, I know—stop worrying. I'm only kidding."

The hospital never slept.

Priscilla sat on the stone bench outside the entrance to the Saint Mary's. Two hydrangea bushes kept her company in the soupy August night—heavy with mist. She perched—legs crossed—white nurse's uniform stark against night sky. Nearby another nurse put out her cigarette on the sidewalk & lingered before meandering back inside glass doors.

In the windows she followed the other nurses executing their rounds— uniforms glowing under florescent lights—she imagined them as angels—wings folded around them in white—careful footsteps on linoleum—

She felt so so heavy—her eyelids—metal doors of an operating room—slam shut—her heart starting to throb in her temples—blood on her latex gloves— & she looked down & she was just white—white again—

His blue truck pulled up—headlights making her squint.

"Is that you Bill?"

"Do you have other boys come pick you up?" he teased.

She got in, still dazed from visions of angels. "Okay—so what now?"

"What?" he said.

As they pulled away hospital lights shrank into stars—lush tree lining the avenue seemed to sprout—growing taller around them. Crickets kept watch over the time—their legs taking inventory of each heavy second. Time seemed to be slowing—so tired from August—so tired from being up all night—

“You just want to worry Mother by dropping me off—is that what you’re going for?”

“Oh never—will she be worried?”

“Oh she’s worried about everything.”

“Should I not drop you off?” he gripped the steering wheel nervously.

“Stop it—tell me what you’re up to Bill. You’re throwing me for a loop.”

“For a loop?”

“Through a loop for a loop I don’t know what kind of way I’m in, but you better get to explaining. I’m running on three hours of sleep and two black coffees and I haven’t eaten anything substantial since lunch.”

“I was thinking we’d grab a bite.”

“Oh, Bill I’m not going anywhere in this.” She was suddenly aware of starched fabric brushing against skin. “I just want to take it off—it’s so God damn pale and I feel like... I feel like... I just feel tired—let’s take me home—I shouldn’t have made you come get me—”

“What? Are you okay Pris?”

She covered her face with the back of her hand. She turned to the open window—wind ruffling her thick brown hair. They pulled into the gas station in Paoli where they met.

Bill rummaged in his pocket after putting the car in park as if to look for his wallet or something.

“Did you forget something at work?” she asked to change the subject—dabbing her eyes with her sleeve.

“Oh, no. What’s going on Pris—what do you feel like? Is it something I did?”

“I feel like—I feel like you won’t understand.”

“Come on—I can listen at least.”

“I just feel... promise you won’t think I’m crazy?”

“I know you’re crazy.”

“Come on now.”

“Yes, yes—I won’t think you’re crazy.”

“I just feel... covered in death today.”

He put his hand on her knee.

“It just wasn’t the best shift is all—it’s nothing.”

“You can cry if you need to.”

“Oh, stop it—I can’t handle you tonight. Will you grab what you need and take me the hell home?”

Neither of them moved.

Another car rolled past them on the empty road—headlights flashing in the car windows.

“A man passed about an hour ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t my fault but I always feel like it is.”

“It’s not.”

“I said I know that.”

“I don’t think I’d be as calm as you. I would need to take a day off or something. You work tomorrow?”

“Back in like usual,” she said. “I really need to sleep Bill I don’t know what you’re doing here.”

“One sec,” he said and went to the snack machine. He bought them each a glazed doughnut packaged in plastic wrap.

Pris raised her eye brows. “Nice dinner at Pepper’s for doughnuts—I can appreciate,” she said swiping the doughnut from his hand & whipping off the wrapper.

“God that’s what I needed,” she sighed after biting down through layers of sugary glaze.

“People are going to think we’re up to something else the way you’re talking—we parked here all alone at night,” Bill said with a creeping smile.

She shoved him jokingly “Stop it—I’m not like that.”

Bill opened his car door & walked around to open hers.

“I’m not getting out. You’re taking me home. I’m tired.”

She popped the last bite of doughnut into her mouth & chewed. He suppressed a grin as he observed the slight wave of her dark hair—her glossy eyes—the curve of her nose.

“Then I’ll do it here,” he said, getting down on one knee. He revealed the black box from his pocket—lustfully dull gold diamond ring flickering in the gas station lights.



Becoming a woman

April 29th 2008

I wadded up toilet paper in the bathroom at school & constructed a make-shift pad. It was crumbly & super uncomfortable. I had to keep re-making it between classes. I had yet to accept that it wasn't going to stop. I hoped that maybe it was something else—that maybe periods took time to start.

June 5th 2002

Mom & I took a walk. I was in third grade. We walked through the field between our house & the high school building—all the way through town up to the CVS to buy Snapple. She talked about breasts first & then gradually made her way into the subject of bleeding.

Mom assured me that it wasn't that much blood—that other girls were going to exaggerate a lot about them—that it wasn't going to hurt that bad & it wasn't going to be that much blood.

“Some people say you become a woman. I don't think of it like that,” she said.

I had never thought a woman was something you could become. Something that happened to you. I had never thought of myself as becoming anything. The idea of becoming frightened me. I wasn't even really sure what a woman was.

I thought of my mother's makeup bag—a red sack on the back of the toilet. A jar of concealer—a brush—her toe-nail polish chipped—her red lip stick she wore only on Christmas.

I thought of her full-length mirror. It was the only full-length mirror in our house. Alone I'd sneak in to take inventory of my body. I touched puffy cheeks—my stomach rolls. I was too round to be a woman I thought. I remember consciously reflecting that I wouldn't want to ever become a woman. I touched where I would get breasts with the impending fear of their arrival. I resolved I was a tom boy.

“It won't hurt?” I asked.

“No—maybe a little.”

That wasn't reassuring.

At the end of the talk, I asked, “Can we take another walk and you can tell me where babies come from?”

“You don't need to know that—not until you're much older and married.”

April 30th, 2008

Finally, that night I came to my mother—holding my underwear with the brownish stain in one hand.

“Mom I went to the bathroom in my pants,” I said. The words to describe menstruation escaped me.

“What are you holding it for?” Mom asked.

She stood up to come over to me & when she saw them she understood.

We waited like spies till when Dad & Uncle Rich went to bed to sneak downstairs so she could show me where she kept the pads.

“Tampons aren't necessary,” she explained.

“When I got my period grand mom never told me about it. I got chemical burns on my hands from trying to get the stains out of my underwear.”

I didn't respond.

I wish our periods were something we talked about. I know that I can't ask Flo or Mary about theirs now. I mean—I could but that's the thing about periods you can't just start talking about them. Everyone's always too early or too late to get theirs—everyone's always cautious or not cautious enough to let their child know that they're now in danger of being a sexual being.

I know that Priscilla had her period last of her sisters.

I know her sister didn't talk about bleeding, but that they shared rooms.

Mary was the first. None of the girls noticed because she's quiet about everything she does. It wasn't nearly a year later that Flo found out by reading the pamphlet that Mary left on her night stand. The booklet was from her mother & it was called "Growing Up, And Liking It."

The pamphlet had a red plaid cover & it went into all the rules about periods. Flo was astounded & horrified & had to tell Pris & Joan.

April 15th, 1953

Pris read the pamphlet alone—sitting on the end of her bed as she brushed her hair before bed.

She thought of herself as lucky to not have a period like Mary. Mary was always older than the year's difference between her & Pris. Mary mother among sisters.

"Would you like to be a mother?" Pris asked Mary one night before bed. Mary was reading a prayer book she had got for confirmation.

"Oh? I don't know. Maybe."

"I think I would."

"That's nice," Mary said & went back to reading.

"Do you think you're a woman?" Pris asked.

Mary laughed & looked up again—pushing up her bulbous glasses. "I'd hope so."

"When did you know?"

"When did I know what?"

"That you were a woman."

"That's absurd what else would I be?"

"I mean—did you feel it happen?"

"Happen?"

"Becoming a woman."

"I think it's just always been there. It's not something I can feel."

Pris bounced her knee & drummed her fingers on her thigh. She was wearing her green night gown—her favorite one with the ruffles at the end of the sleeves.

"I feel like I'll never get to be one," Pris said.

"I mean you're only fifteen."

"I never... I never... I don't have the month yet."

Mary nodded. She looked at the door to check if Flo & Joan were anywhere near by. She lowered her voice & scooted closer to Pris. "It's awful."

"Awful?" Pris asked.

"I mean—It's nothing."

"Nothing and awful?"

"It's just blood Pris—it's just blood."

"Does it hurt?"

"Yeah—it's annoying—like a bee sting but not really."

"A bee sting?"

“Maybe that was a little extreme—I’m done talking about this. You’re just like Flo—she’s so nosy.”

“No but—I just want to know if I’m doing it right.”

“It?”

“Being a woman.”

“I don’t think you can do it wrong,” Mary said with a chuckle.

“I could be doing better though.”

Mary shrugged. “You could ask Mother?”

“Oh no!” Pris said—crossing her arms across her chest & laying back in bed.

“Do you think you’ll marry someone soon?”

Mary looked up again—this time more reluctantly. “If... if there’s someone.”

“I think I should like to tomorrow if there was someone. Anyone I feel like sometimes. Is that bad? I think anyone could do.”

“You shouldn’t let them know that.”

“Oh! Of course not. I’d never tell anyone that.”

“Women have to be careful,” Mary said.

“I know I know—I’m just talking. Can you let me talk?”

“Go on then,” Mary said—going back to reading.

“Can you show me what it looks like?”

Mary stood up—tossing the book on her bed & walking to the little bathroom. She opened the medicine cabinet—making sure the coast was clear-- & then indicating where the sanitary pads were.

“I thought it was a belt?”

“Sometimes—I have one too. These are better.”

“Oh...”

“Are you going to leave me alone?”

Pris flushed & she went off to locate the plaid pamphlet.

Alone in the side room she opened it & read it cover to cover again—

The pamphlet assured her in a fatherly voice:

1. You might get the blues but those woeful feelings are only temporary
2. You might feel fat but forget it—you’re the same as you were
3. You have no pep—you’ll be in normal health when you period is over!
4. You get cramps—relax & take it easy
5. You might get a backache—don’t brood over it
6. Swelling? Your bosom might feel different—it goes away

The pamphlet went on to note what you should & shouldn’t do on your period. No picnics because you might get caught outside in the rain but taking showers was entirely acceptable.

Pris analyzed herself for any symptoms. She certainly felt the blues lately—she felt like she was getting older all too fast. She felt like everything was ending & beginning. Her breasts were getting larger—her legs bristling with hair.

August 4th, 1956

Priscilla was kneeling in church. She felt a wetness between her legs & assumed she had peed herself. Terrified she stood up & shuffled to the bathroom.

There in the stall with the light sound of the church chanting the Apostles Creed she looked in her white cotton underwear & saw blood. She pulled the panties off & scrutinized it to be sure.

She hadn't felt anything special—no signs. Not anything. She sat there—on the toilet disappointed.

Pris had hoped it was give her something—some sort of womanly sense—like the way her mother knew when her children wanted to have their hair pet—the way she caressed their backs when she embraced them. She wanted to throw away the underwear in protest—in protest of the blood. It all seemed so pointless. She put them back on. She felt like everyone had to know. Cautiously, she walked—short little steps all the way back to her seat on the pew. She shifted in her seat. She had the notion everyone in the whole church could smell 'it' on her. She bleed the rest of Mass.

She kind of liked it. It didn't bother her too much to have the blood on her dress. She was just relieved that she wasn't in pain. She had night terrors of stabbing pains tearing through her abdomen—bees swarming at the windowsill. It didn't feel like a bee-sting at all. It didn't really feel like anything. In fact, she thought she might like to handle her periods like this—no pads to change like diapers. That was until of course her period got heavier & it ruined her nice light blue dress by the time they got home.

At home, she changed her dress. Folded it in the back of her closet.

That night she walked past Mary into the bathroom.

There's Jobs for Girls.

"I just sat there bawling Joan—bawling like a little girl," Flo said—taking a sip from the red & green coffee mug.

"Was it that awful down there?" Joan asked. She settled herself in the blue arm chair next to Flo.

Joan turned down the knob on the down radio so that the morning news was only a mutter.

"We can keep listening," Flo said.

"We should talk." Joan touched her sister's hand. "Mother's still in bed—you can tell me."

"It wasn't the work—I mean it was the work. Have you ever seen a picture of someone's insides?"

Joan shrugged. "Maybe in grade school—maybe once. It's morbid really. I don't like to think about that."

"Blood—you know. I just never thought of it like that."

Flo nodded to herself.

"The first day of class we had to outline a chapter on the cardio—cardio Vaseline system. I tried to focus on the notes. My desk lamp was so dim though—I swear it was like writing by a candle light. Anyway, I started to read and then I started hearing it."

"Hearing it?"

"Mine—my heart—it was like it was coming from the book—out of the book into me and my heart was so loud. I started to worry about having to hear other people's hearts—they're so much—like little watches. Do you remember when Jack smashed his pocket watch when he was little?"

Joan scoffed. "Daddy was so sore."

"Fragile like that."

Joan nodded.

"But more than the work it was the room. That god forsaken room. It's was a prison Joan. A little tiny prison. I might as well have gone to seminary. Oh it was such a sad little room—it just had a bed—this wooden desk. How do you focus at that rigid a desk? My rear-end hurt sitting there. It was like a pew. I was looking at a text book with skeleton—an awful Halloween thing—and then I realized all those little bones were in me too—all of—it was too much."

"To have bones?"

"To have my bones and see other people's bones."

"Well it was nursing school Flo—what did you expect?"

"I don't know—I don't think I expect anything. I guess I expected to be like Pris and Mary. Oh you know them. You know them—the 'smart ones' like Mother says."

"Hey—don't cry you're home Flo. No one blames you," Joan caressed her sister's knee. She set her coffee on a coaster.

"God Mary could do it—she could—Pris—you know how they are—they're the smart ones—they're always been the smart ones," Flo said—dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief.

"You got the looks." Joan raised her eyebrows.

Flo shook her head "You shouldn't say that."

"I'll say what I think. Hell, I didn't get them."

“What do you think mother is thinking?” Flo asked. She paused to look up at the ceiling tiles.

“That her girl is home to stay.”

“She worries when we’re gone.”

“So what if you’re not a nurse like Mary and Pris?” Joan asked. “No everyone is meant to be the same.”

“Oh Joan I tried I tried it was just—“ Flo stuttered. “Oh so hollow.”

Flo stared off. “So hollow. I thought of sitting with mother. Sitting with Mary. Sitting with Pris. We were all little and we were sitting in the pews at church—that’s what the desk chairs felt like—like little pews. I started prayin. All I could do was call mother and come home. I think God told me to. He knows I couldn’t do what they do—I’m too scared.”

“Most girls don’t even try,” Joan said.

“I’m too scared of seeing it.”

“Seeing what? Those body diagrams.”

Flo tried to breathe even. “Oh Mary I don’t want to think of someone dying. Not because of me—“

“—Oh Flo—“

“I wasn’t cut for it—“

“Florence—“

“we ate cold egg salad for lunch in the dining area—it was alright but it made me so sad—I was so sick Joan—so sick Mary and Pris—They’re the smart ones—“

“Say it again and I’ll start getting offended.”

“Oh! No! I know you’re—“

“Joking Flo—joking.” Joan finished off her cup of coffee & picked up her pocketbook on the counter.

“Yes of course,” Flo said. “I’ll get a job then—there’s jobs for girls—“

“You better hop on it too or mother will ask you if you’ll be a nun,” Joan teased. She opened her purse & pulled out a cigarette. She took a drag & waved her hand to disperse the cloud of smoke.

“She asks you?”

“Only because she worries,” Joan said—rolling her eyes. She talked in a hushed voice.

“You shouldn’t smoke inside—it smells awful and mother doesn’t like it.”

“Here—it calms your nerves,” Joan said—taking out a white stick for her sister. She handed Flo her blue lighter.

“Am I holding it right?” Flo asked—cigarette clenched in her teeth.

“No—Oh Flo—Oh God—here. Who’s the older sibling again?” she jeered.

After a few silent puffs Flo reported, “It’s not working.”

“Forget it—it’s not for everyone.”

“Right—I could type—I can type well,” Flo said, nodding.

“You can do more than type Flo.” Joan looked at her black heels and brought the cigarette to her lips again. “You know if you wanted him you could have him.”

Flabbergasted—Flo feigned a look of disgust.

“Frank all to yourself—he’s got the money,” Joan said. “He’d love to make a little wife out of you.”

“And you?”

“Me? I’ll figure things out. I love this real-estate place. Love it. The money is a plus.”

“Not going to be a nun?”

Joan put out her smoke in the ash tray on the coffee table. “You and mother are conspiring against me, aren’t you?”

Burning Love

Mom puts on “The King”
Late afternoon before we
leave for Sunday dinner.
She reaps sun from dusk

maroon beams
into record divots—
plays sunset hot as
Burning Love

we forget
the sink swollen
with breakfast dishes &
trash bags at the back door

Mom says
I feel my temperature rising
Higher higher

dancing with
the curvy silhouette of a broom—

Mom always says when
“The King” sings
we drop our bodies—

live in our feet—

She says
You light my morning sky
with burning love

We daybreak
church candles—
match box flint smell
& a white altar boy robe

She laughs
It's coming closer
The flames are reaching my body

I feel silly to twist—
too old to shake

Mom is contagious— a

stuck-in-you-head-song—

Record player
skips when her dance-steps
tremble across tile floor

Mom sings
Please won't you help me
I feel like I'm slipping away

& we shout back
your kisses lift me higher
like the sweet song of the choir

picks us both up

smell of blue dish soap

vacuum breath

She tosses us on
our plaid couch

needle trips off record

And you light my
Evening sky

With burning love

sometimes i think of you as Eleanor Rigby

1. singing into my bed posts— we loved the beatles like you did—my first cd; green apple on the cover—fast foreword—rewind *Come Together* for the eight time— Will you come together? Will you come tell me your favorite one of their songs? i can never pick one but back then i liked anything where George Harrison played the sitar—*Only a Northern Song*—finger nails plucking window panes—
2. the house on main street felt temporary—walls strummed with chords—this was before i knew people get two sets of grandparents—did you sit on the grey sunken couch while i asked dad to sing *Eleanor Rigby* again
we lived there for only about a year—maybe two & now there’s a big flat patch of land where our brick house used to be—
3. dad likes anything by John Lennon—i used to think they were the same person— did you pull him off a record—tangled in guitar strings? Alone in the rec room— did you sing him into a body?
4. we are no-where men: dad & i & you—we got him an iPod & he’ll disappear with it for hours—sometimes i’ll catch him—staring in to a corner—knee bouncing— mouthing *Sargent Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*—do you hear it too? Do you sing while he has his headphones in?
5. could you hear him tossing & turning with his black & white Rickenbacker— mumbling a different kind of hymn?
dad keeps bar chords in his wallet next to a picture of me— did you ever hold a guitar?
6. i asked him to teach how to play & we walked up & down the neck of an Ibanez— cement sidewalk out front—i collected his picks like dandelions—tucked them under my pillow—did you steal them too?
7. i used to think the refrain was *oh look at all the lovely people*—i argued when dad told me it was *lonely*—i used to be scared of that loneliness—the kind dad makes when he rests on empty orange paint buckets in the garage when it rains—
8. *she wears a face that she keeps in a jar by the door*—
i can only put you together from black & white pictures—your features staring back through my skin in the bathroom mirror—are you lonely where you are? Do you have an iPod? Do you hear me when i sing your name
Eleanor Rigby waits at a church where a wedding has been—
9. is your mouth in one of the boxes we’ve still yet to unpack?
10. you can use my boom box—it’s not hard to work—the little arrow means “play” the two littles lines “pause” & the double arrows “fast-forward” & “rewind”
11. how far back can we rewind? Back to our separate rooms where we miss each other—carve nostalgia from Paul McCartney’s throat—off the disc—
12. What kind of nowhere are we making? my father & i who both sold our guitars this past december—will you buy them & keep them safe for us? Don’t let dad sell his beatles’ records too—i know you still want to play them—did you have some of the same ones?
13. i found a guitar pick in my jean pocket—did you leave it there for me?
i’m carrying it back to the attic—oh ache of floor board—
ahh look at all the lonely people.

Hair

Nine.

Dad paged through the hairstyles catalog in waiting room of Kutz & Karats salon. The vestibule smelled like those scented pinecones from the craft store. Dad had found the only book with boy's haircuts. He pointed to one with spikes. "I like this."

"Can we get me hair gel?"

"Sure—it'll be great for when you fight. You won't have all that hair in the way of your helmet."

Brown hair poured to my shoulders—bangs falling just in front of my eyes. I kept pulling the curtain of hair to the side with my fingers to try & see. My hair was slightly greasy. I hadn't showered after karate the night before.

"We should go to a barber next time," Dad said.

"Can we?"

"If mom lets us."

"Sarah, we're ready to take you back now and get your hair washed," Tami said—throwing her bushel of blonde hair back into a bun.

"Don't you ever wish you could cut it all off?" Priscilla asked. She tucked another strand of her hair into the pink curlers.

"What?" Flo mumbled, bobby-pin in her mouth.

"All your hair," Priscilla said. She touched her face in the bathroom mirror.

Flo furrowed her brow. "What are you going on about?"

"You know—you wouldn't have to curl it or go to the salon or sit under those dryer contraptions."

"Well what would you do with it?" Flo asked. She nudged Priscilla out of the way of the mirror to look at a zit that cropped up on the end of her nose.

"I want gel," I told Tami.

Tami cut my hair from the time I was three. There's a little baggie in the back of Mom's sock drawer that still has my hair from when I first got it cut.

"Well—did you settle on a style?" she asked. She turned to Dad who was awkwardly clutching the men's hairstyle magazine. The model had icy blue eyes—his brown hair standing up stiff from gel.

"Aw, but you have so much nice hair." She gave me a mothering smile & nod—grabbing a handful—feeling each strand's soft texture.

"It's not good for fighting. I do karate."

Priscilla drummed her fingers on the arm of the styling chair at Margie's Salon. The dryer droned over her head.

Flo & Mary on either side—she glanced at the two of them. They had their eyes shut—reclining & enjoying the afternoon.

Priscilla looked at her watch.

"How much longer?" she finally asked.

"You asked two minutes ago. It's still half an hour," Mary said.

"Oh—but I have an idea."

"An idea?" Mary asked.

“Yes—it’s not a big idea but I need something to write it down on. It’s a little poem I think.”

“You’ll have the idea when you get home.”

“She wants to cut her hair off,” Flo said to Mary. She shouted so that her voice would carry across the salon. Other women shifted uncomfortably in their chairs—side-glancing Priscilla.

I took a glob of neon blue hair gel & ran the goo through my hair. Spikes. I came downstairs—white uniform on—green belt tied around my waist. “Look dad!”

He touched the crunchy spikes cautiously as if they were razor sharp.

“Yeah, punk rock.”

“Did you have to cut it *that* short,” Mom said.

“Next time we’re going to the barbers!” I boasted.

In front of the bathroom mirror Priscilla pulled her hair back into a tight ponytail. She imagined what her face would look like without thick brown hair bouncing around. Sometimes she wished her hair was wispy like Flo or Joan’s—light & silky & not so coarse. She put on her white headband. She turned her head side to side—as if posing for a photo shoot. A curl popped out of the headband. She tucked the strand of hair behind her ear.

Fifteen.

I remember thinking that I couldn’t wait another minute to cut all of it off.

I left the house early on a chilly March morning.

I walked down Noble all the way to Main Street.

“Do you take walk-ins?”

“You’re in luck! No one usually comes this early!” the stylist said. She had long green strands of hair pulled back into two buns.

My hair rested half-way down my back.

When she was done flat-iron tortured hair clumped all over the tile floor. The stylist swept my hair up with a little dust pan.

My neck was cold on the way home.

I felt so light.

“What’d you have to say that,” Priscilla said to Flo.

“What?” Flo asked. She was inspecting a run in her tights while she sat on the toilet with the lid down.

“That I want to cut off my hair.”

“You’re the one who brought it up.”

“What if I did?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I know I wouldn’t... but what if I wanted to. Do you think I ever could?”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” Flo said. She stood up to leave.

“No wait. I just don’t know why I just feel like it would feel... it would feel lighter.”

Flo shrugged. “That’s just how life is right—the sister with the nicest hair wants to be a beatnik all of a sudden.”

Flo left to put her shoes on for work.

Priscilla leaned into the mirror again. She used a bobby-pin to pull some loose strands away from her face.

“She turned lesbian,” the girl on the other side of the lockers said.

I took off my grey gym shirt—standing in my white cotton bra & blue gym shorts. I picked a locker far from all the other girls.

I put the wadded-up shirt to my chest as the two girls walked over. They were younger than me—freshman, but I was still scared of them. They had already mastered pastel pallet eye shadow & lush straightened hair. They smelled of sickly sweet bubble gum.

Giggling as they approached, one turn to the other & raised her eyebrows before actually surveying me—up & down. “Did you turn lesbian?” she asked. She smiled—coy—as if her question was as mundane as “Are you buying lunch today?”

I didn’t answer because I didn’t know. The word. “Lesbian”. She did harm with the way she let it drip out of her mouth—malicious & mythical.

I didn’t feel bad though. A little flushed from the encounter—but not ashamed. I was late to run laps. While all the other girls had gone out to the gym I walked into the bathroom to look in the full-length mirrors. I took inventory of my whole body—goosebumps & freckles & unshaved knees. I turned to the side—tilted my head—crooked tooth smiled—ran my fingers through my short hair—

How High the Moon

I have two favorite pictures from my parent's wedding.

1) Dad & Mom kissing on the steps of whatever hotel their reception was at & next to them is my uncle dramatically rolling his eyes—the frills of her dress are bunched up around her & Uncle Rich still has a crop of black hair on his head

2) they're riding away from the wedding in Dad's blue jeep—a lovely juxtaposition to their wedding attire—in the back seat sits the blow-up penguin with a sort of grimace on his beak—

The pictures remind me that there are stories we can't re-tell & that we don't & in my family love is a story often not retold.

I want to imagine my grandfather and my grandmother together.

My family isn't really a bunch of romantics. My parents don't talk about their relationship. They don't really say 'I love you' aloud very much. I asked Mom how her & Dad met & she just said, "I was friends with Rich." They all went to the same Catholic high school & Mom would cross over to the "boys" side (yes it was gender separated) to take the harder classes that were usually only offered for boys.

I'm not sure how I became a hopeless romantic in my family where prying a love story out of anyone is kind of a lost cause. The closest thing I can think of is Mom telling me that my dad cooked for her when she came home from the hospital after having me and he made what he has titled "vegetable mosh-pit" (basically just cut-up vegetables thrown in a pot with stewed tomatoes—a culinary inspiration). His love is grumpy—a quiet bouquet of flowers—broches from Soreli jewelry up the street.

My parents sleep in separate rooms now. I think they still love each other in a bitter obstinate sort of way. Dad sleeps in what used to be my room. The mattress in sunk in & the curtains are always pulled shut. The walls painted like the rainforest & his noise machine keeps the artificial sound of rain playing all day long. There's usually a book laying face down on whatever page he stopped at.

"Why don't you share a room with mom anymore?" I asked him this summer.

"I have to sleep," he says. Which is fair—he does go to work at like four in the morning.

I don't know if wedding photos were just strategically picturesque in the 1950s but Pop-Pop & Priscilla's wedding photos audaciously bloom from all corners of the aunt's photo albums. There aren't any candid shots of their wedding. In black & white my grandmother's skin looks smooth & paper-like—she stands—her dress a hydrangea flower. Her bride's maids all holding bouquets. Slim smiles. Staring towards the camera. There is only one picture I can actually find of her & Pop-Pop. They hold each other's hands & looking towards the camera—both smile lightly as if suppressing a laugh.

When I ask the Aunts about the love between my Pop-Pop & Priscilla they hesitate—Aunt Mary says, "I'm not one to ask about that."

I would ask Pop-Pop & my grandmother what they almost laughed about in that picture. What they talked about doing together? I don't know if they were even like that—if people talked about running away from everything. My grandfather strikes me as the kind of man you'd run away with.

When I start to fall in love with someone I have a tendency to imagine where I would run away to with them if I could put my whole world on pause just to know them.

I feel like Pop-Pop might have felt like that when he met Priscilla—she was more than just a paper woman—she was smart enough to be top of her class at nursing school & a head nurse at the hospital. She worked third shifts in the intensive care unit. She didn't go to college for the Mrs. degree—she went because she was passionate & cared about what she did. She said the rosary in the morning. She wrote poetry in the margins of the daily paper. She drew the trees outside the window. She kept a journal by her bed. She baked pineapple upside down cake & ate it with her fingers—licking the syrup off—

How could she not strike my grandfather when they met?

No one seems to know where their first date was—Pop-Pop was astounded that she had even agreed. He paced the floor of the mechanic shop, trying to think of where to take a woman with a smile that bent lamp posts—he would decide it had to be classy—like her—they'd get in his blue pick-up truck—Pris's sisters & mother all looking out the bay window as she got in wearing her new navy blue décolleté dress.

“Where are we going?” she teases as they pull away.

He's frantic—having not know what would be an appropriate place to take a woman like her. “Um... I was thinking we'd mix things up and go to Adams & Bright.”

She laughed & threw her head back.

He gripped the steering wheel tighter & pulled into the nearest gas station.

“Hey what are you playing?” she asked.

He turned to her. “I don't know where I'm going. I've never done this.”

She smiled & grabbed him by the back of the head & kissed him deeply in the hot front seat of the car with the light smell of gasoline.

He blinked & looked her up & down.

“I'd love to go to Adams & Bright—are you going to get me a malt like the kids do?”

“Of course,” he said—still flustered from the kiss.

He turned the car on & it clamored to a start.

“Booth?” he asked as they walked in.

She led him into the luncheonette—jukebox singing Buddy Holly—mixing with chatter—soda fizz & teens doing the jitterbug. Pris was in no way dressed for the occasion & Bill in his nicest suite was just as mismatched. The pair attracted some stares from girls in poodle skirts & boys leaning on the counter.

“I want to sit at the counter,” Pris said.

“You're killing me,” he laughed & followed.

They could barely talk over the music but he liked watching her mannerisms—how she ran her fingers through her perm—how she kissed the red & white striped straw to sip her chocolate malt.

“Are we going to dance at all?” she asked.

“Oh? I mean if you want. I don't know what they're doing,” he said, gesturing to the kids jumpin to their bop music. “I don't much either—but it seems like fun.”

“You strike me more as swing girl,” he said.

“I like jazz too,” she said. “But I'd love to give it whirl,” she said.

“You have a song?” he asked, glancing over at the jukebox—gripping a coin in between his index finger & thumb.

She looked up at the ceiling—putting her finger to her lips.

“I heard a new one I think—it's a little wild,” she said.

“Whatever you want,” he said.

“It’s a Les Paul.”

“I’ve heard of him,” He said—trying to keep up with her.

“It’s called ‘How High The Moon’—I love Mary Ford—she has one of THOSE voices,” she mused.

“How high is the moon?” he asked, standing up from the stool.

“As high as you like it,” she said—taking the coin & walking over to the jukebox.

Somewhere there’s music how faint the tune

Somewhere there’s heeeeeaven

How high the moon

There is no moon above when

Love is far away too—till it come true

That you love me as

I love you—how high the moon

“Why do you like me?” he shouted over the song.

Practically Catholic

Priscilla linked arms with Pop-Pop & escorted him from the front seat of his own red truck.

“You’re stiff as a board.”

“Am I? Should I be?” he asked. He inspected himself up & down & then surveyed her attire—her sweat-heart neckline & modest black heels. He tucked in his dress shirt. It still looked a little messy so he rolled back his shoulders.

“Should you be? They’re normal people Bill I don’t know why you’re acting like they’re here beat you down. You don’t even have to meet Daddy—Mother’s harmless.”

“But you’re still her daughter and she cares about you.”

“Naturally,” Priscilla said, opening the white screen door to the house. The family was congregating around the platters of deli meats, blotchy & not blotchy cheeses, & neatly cut carrots & celery with ranch dip.

Pop-Pop thought of Thanksgiving with his parents—the last one he could remember—the last time him, his father, & his mother sat down for dinner together. He thought of his mother’s slippers & the light odor of the gas stove & the way Mom wiped her hands with the front of her dress when she forgot to put on an apron.

It was small Thanksgiving—the three of them. It was the Thanksgiving after the war ended & Freddy didn’t come home. No one felt like inviting other family members. It was like a vigil there—two candles on the little wooden table. Mom said grace.

The house was a different type of quiet—the type of quiet hungry for someone else’s voice.

Freddy lingered in the living room unseen by Pop-Pop or his parents. He touched the mantle where they tucked his purple heart & folded American flag. They hadn’t been moved since the day they were delivered.

He wanted to tap on his brother’s shoulder & ask him to pull up a chair to their small table in the kitchen.

The past years Pop-Pop had made appearances at friend’s houses for dinner—a few holidays at Mac’s from the shop—never a regular at any of them. Holidays made him feel ghost-like.

“Bill—nice to meet ya finally,” Jack said—snatching Pop-pop’s limp hand.

Jack was a tall man with a strong voice. He was dapper & had a little lady on his arm—Jean in her knee-high skirt & scoop neck shirt.

“You too,” Bill said with less volume than intended. His voice crinkled a little like the static of a radio turning on.

He continued to scan all the faces—a handful of younger children on their stomachs—some pushing metal toy cars & nibbling on pretzels.

“What took ya so long?” Frank asked—slapping him on the back. Pop-pop flinched & grinned somewhat mechanically.

Sundays at the Connors were a religion—mass was in the morning but the religion of the Connor family started when people started to pour into the house on a Sunday afternoon.

Mother was in the kitchen as she always was & Joan was following her around—not actually helping—just talking.

Priscilla pulled Pop-pop through the oceans of relatives who all eyed up the new comer—back of his shirt untucked from his pants.

“Mother!” Priscilla said.

She turned from the pot of boiling corn on the cob she was looming over—the steam fogged her glasses & she plucked them off to wipe them off. “What is it, precious?” she asked & squinted to see the man standing with her daughter. She blinked.

“Is that all?” She wiped her hands with a dish rag & smiled at him.

Pop-pop was stricken. He attempted to grab hold of something profound within himself to say to her—some about himself—something grand or interesting. He proclaimed, “I work at the gas station in Paoli.”

She nodded. “Pris told me.” Mother brought him in for a gentle yet reserved embrace.

Rigor mortis had already set in for Pop-Pop.

“You make my daughter happy?” Mother half asked half stated.

“Of course—don’t tease him he scares easy.”

“What took you so long to come out here?” she asked—turning back to the food to start piling each dish in serving plates.

“I was—I was I work a lot,” Pop-pop said.

“On Sundays?” she asked suspiciously—this turned a few other heads.

“Oh no—no I uh—I visit my father on Sundays. We’re Orthodox—Greek Orthodox.” After a pause he added, “Practically Catholic.”

“Practically Catholic” was a phrase that was only ever used once through the course of Pris & Pop-Pop’s relationship & Pop-Pop regretted its conception as soon it left his mouth. For Catholics there no “in-between”.

“Practically?” Mother asked.

“Would you like some help?” Pris asked—picking up the tray of corn & dish of butter. “Joan are you gonna help or stand there looking beautiful?”

“It’s what I do best,” Joan said—twirling a strand of her hair.

“Where’s Flo anyway?”

“She’s out there with Frank where else would she be?” Joan replied. “They’re steady,” Joan said to Pop-Pop.

In the living room Frank was sitting in the blue arm chair with Flo perched pretty at his side. The chair was big enough to be a love seat but Flo liked to pretend to be modest.

Pris & Pop-Pop helped Mother set the table—tactfully side-stepping providing a description of the state of being “Practically Catholic”. They left Mother to finish up the roast. Joan stayed in the kitchen looking out the window.

Out in the living room where Frank was cultivating conversation like he always did. He was a business boy & his family helped with the Christmas Bazaar at Mother of Divine Providence like Mother & Mary did.

“And then Flo said—Flo said we ought to go out to Mac’s drive-in and of course we went—how can you say ‘no’ to that?” He boasted.

Pris poured a drink—a Manhattan at the bar & offered Bill some.

“Do you have any beer?” he asked. “That’s a girly drink.”

She furrowed her brow & crossed her arms. “Girly drink? It’s whiskey and vermouth.”

“I don’t think I even know what vermouth is.”

She nudged her glass towards him. He rolled his eyes & took a sip.

“That’s not bad—wait you THAT?”

“Eases the nerves,” Pris parroted.

They stood next to each other & let the family happen around them. His shoulder touched hers. She smirked.

“Practically Catholic huh?” Pris teased—reaching to dip a Lays chip into the onion dip & popping it into her mouth.

“What was I supposed to say?”

Saying Grace

at family dinners i used to take pride in being the one mom would ask to say grace—
the father – the son & the holy spirit—invisible crosses draw in the air—stream from
scalloped potatoes & the Christmas honey ham—

there is a certain type of person in a family who can say grace—aunt mary—is another—
between joan & flo—tracing crosses—the weight of nails—who will get the stigmata?

who will cry this easter mass when we tell them to crucify him?

when i pray i imagine skipping flat stones in the baptismal foundation—god splashing in
the rain puddles outside Saint Mary's—

i don't remember the exact moment when it stopped—when they stopped asking me to
say grace on holidays—

maybe it was after

my first semester of college when i came back like a prodigal son—

the lost & found brother

we slaughtered the good butternut squash for soup—

or maybe it was after

i had slept over at Giulio's house & they were sure i couldn't be a virgin—

did my grandmother say grace—did she want to?

it's not that i wanted to say grace this year—chairs shifting across the red speckled
kitchen floor—my brother glancing up at me across the table while i tune out—
there's not a single moment where i feel the urge to say anything—

a kind of distance—

a kind of fading—i open the hymnals & they're always blank—

did my grandmother ever question our orderly god?

—the god of candles & purple advent robes & disappearing bodies—the host becoming
flesh—

becoming honey ham & turkey legs—

i drink my grandmother's blood from the silver chalice—wipe my lips off the rim—

did she pray the rosary or did she just count the beads—1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10—
ten fathers—

i know i know

i know i don't want to say grace—but i remember how—

in the name of the father & the son & the holy spirit—

bless us oh lord & these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty
through christ oh lord

amen—

So so high up

The best climbing tree in the whole world is in The Aunt's front yard.

The trunk is thin enough to grasp easily—sturdy yet flexible—arms bending—cradling me branch by branch—higher—green rustle goosebumps down her arms—this tree is a kind of family member—

I had a phase when I was like eight when I wanted to be adventurous & climb trees wherever our family went—the gardens of Reading museum—the park up the street. I didn't have great upper arm strength to lift me up to the first branches. I needed trees that lifted me—that bent down to pick me up. This made the oaks behind our neighbor's garage & the pine in our back yard out of the question—arms holding the sky up from the tilled farm-land earth. I was so envious of kids with nice trees in their yards—the kind of trees that beckoned you inside—their branches low—pulling you escalator-up—

Like any Saturday in the summer, Uncle Rich, Dad, Billy & I drove up to The Aunts. Rich & Dad were going to trim their hedges & fight the ivy that always seems to be creeping up their fence from their neighbor's yard.

Fighting foliage is a Gow brothers' tradition.

Billy & I were sitting in the living room, trying to come up with things to talk to The Aunts about.

Billy occupied himself with this plastic toy trailer full of little metal cars. It used to be Dad's from when he was a little kid. Billy got off easy because he was always the quiet one. After a few questions the Aunts left him play.

Billy was a ritual child—always going to the attic to retrieve the same toys—arranging them in rows on the carpet. He'd then spend the rest of the afternoon lining up the cars in different patterns & configurations. The Aunts always offered for him to take the toy home with us but he liked to keep it at their house—that's what made it special. The paint on the cars was mostly rubbed away from all the afternoons they spent in my father's & my uncle's own small thumbs & index fingers—they were worn smooth by tactile memory. There is a weight to metal toy cars that doesn't really compare to the matchbox ones Billy & I collected.

Mary asked me for the third time, "How are you liking school?"

By then I was daydreaming out the window. Dad passed by, wrestling with the big hedge clippers. I blinked & took notice of the tree in the front yard.

"I'm going to climb that tree."

Confused, Mary stuttered and managed to say, as the screen door slammed behind me, "Oh be careful! You could fall!" She attempted to stand up several times from the depths of the recliner but I was already outside.

I climbed the tree up to the second branch. Perching there for a little before getting bored. A light breeze kissing my brown hair. I always wanted to go higher but I got too nervous above about six-feet. It always seemed like I was so much farther from the ground than it really was. The wind made the little tree sway—like she was cradling me.

"Did anyone else ever climb that tree?" I asked Aunt Mary when I came inside.

"I don't think so," Mary said—offering me a little cheese & bologna sandwich from the ceremonial meat, cheese, & Triscuits tray.

I munched—brushing crumbs from my thighs. "Not dad?"

“No... I don’t think so... maybe... you should ask him when ya seen him,” she said with a handful of pretzels in her hand. “That tree isn’t that old though—it was much smaller.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah when we got here it was smaller. Not really fit for climbing. It’s grown quite a bit.”

The thought hadn’t really crossed my mind of how long it would take a tree to become a climbing-tree. I thought about the tree as one of those little ones held up with wires in the park or on the main street in Kutztown—it made me think of everything being smaller around the house—the doorways—the pictures on the walls—sun coming in the bay window—

There is a portrait in The Aunt’s living room of the all the cousins in matching beige-brown outfits. The image is a little fuzzy from the sun bleaching the color out of it. In the photo my father is kneeling next to my uncle. They are so small—probably ten & seven. Dad’s face looks just like mine—we have the same clementine rind smile & thick brown hair—Rich is mid-laugh & full of teeth—

Maybe before they took that picture he was out in the front lawn looking at the tree—testing its branches to see if they would support him. Maybe Priscilla would tell him to be careful with his nice clothes one & Dad would ignore her. Maybe he wanted to pick up the cicadas from the branches to inspect them & put them in match boxes next to his rock collection—

I feared cicadas when I first found them on the climbing-tree—an exo-skeleton crunching as I grasped a branch. I shrieked & brought the carcass inside. Dad told me about how cicadas burrow & only come out every so many years. Their rarity made them less frightening—

Uncle Rich is much more like Billy—maybe he was playing on the floor before they took the picture—his bush of black curly hair wobbling as he sat making doodles in a notebook as he has always liked to do—I’m watching the doodles grow more & more detailed—turning into figures—to posing people—their features becoming more & more defined as my uncle ages on the carpet there & his hair starts to grow back into his head until it only grows puffy on either side of his bald topped skull—he’s Uncle Rich there—sitting in brown armchair—glass of diet coke in hand after trimming the hedges.

“We used to be the only house on the whole street,” Rich told me on the ride home.

He described riding his bike up & down the serpentine roads where all the houses would grow—seeing just trees & blank patches of grass & dirt foundations—the roads led back into a forest that would be cleared for more strip malls, little houses with perfectly square lawns, corporate buildings & the suburban sprawl that is King of Prussia today. I wish I could have watched it grow like that—are the ghosts of the forest among us?

Rich says there used to be a house way back there—all over grown. A mason left over from the 1920s boom-time. It was covered in ivy—he never went inside but that there was a little self-gasoline pump in the drive way—the people had to have been so rich that they were some of the few to have automobiles in the neighborhood.

I can see the ivy receding & the old model Ts pulling up to drop off their guests in flapper attire & lavish suites with flashy gold cuff links—they clink glasses & sit on the porch to look at the night coming down like a chandelier over the hills—

vines start to grow—they pull each car into the soil & the people turn to skeletons in their ritzy clothing & the house is swallowed before my uncle's seven-year-old-eyes & in the house's place a tall tall glass building full offices grows & next door the brush falls away to reveal another Dunkin Doughnuts with a line at the drive through—

& meanwhile Dad tries to climb the tree in the front lawn of The Aunt's house & from his perch on the shortest branch he watches the houses growing from their plots—roofs protruding from the grass becoming fully formed houses with lawn jockeys & little red-flag mailboxes—until the houses grow windows to fill with fake candles & until he is a father & he is watching his child on the same branch he once sat on—she dangles her legs & tells him she is so so high up & can't get down—



Babe Ruth

When I was ten I wanted to be like Babe Ruth.

On the weekends, Dad & me would go to the park batting cages as early as March—grass still frost-coated in the morning. He bought a bucket of softballs—neon green planets for me to smack through the atmosphere.

We loaded up the blue jeep—cleat, bats, and orange paint pale of balls.

Weeds sprouted on the floor of the cage. Dad would draw an 'X' in the gravel with his tattered white nike sneaker to mark the plate.

For me, Dad learned to pitch underhand—whipping the bulbous yellowish-lime ball.

I liked to point at the sky with my bat like Babe Ruth did before he hit a homerun.

When Dad was ten he believed in Babe Ruth.

He carved a line in the dirt with his heel before entering the batter's box.

Kenny Thomas was pitching.

Dad spat in the dirt because that's what ball players do. He wore his backwards Phillies cap—dusty jeans—chewing gum tucked under his tongue—he imagined his face on baseball cards—sly grin & bat slung over shoulder—

“Hey batter batter batter batter—SWING!” taunted the second basemen.

Kenny wound up the pitch—arm back—cleated-foot poised in the air—a bird—a heron—

Bases loaded. Well... actually... there was only a person on second & third but it's better for a baseball story to say that the bases were loaded.

Every once in a while the pitch would come perfect—my sweet spot—right at the corner of the batter's box. Not too low. Not too high. Tucked right in the corner—

Blink.

The ball left Dad's hand—goosebumps—neck hair prickled—I knew instantly that the pitch was coming in perfect.

My body synced to the ball—collided—smack.

The net plucked the hit out of the air. Ball fell like a dead bird.

“That would have been out of here,” Dad said.

We both stared at the carcass & I tapped the bat on my heels.

“Shut up Mitch!” Dad barked.

They didn't wear helmets. Their type of baseball went as many innings as the sun gave them—sunset excitedly red—

There was a religious quality to it—

sometimes Dad would think of the batter's box as a sort of confessional—each pitch a chance to pray himself free of all the weight beaming down from the park lights—

Dad shifted his weight.

First pitch: strike.

Inhale.

Blink.

“Don't let them get in your head Billy!” Alex shouted from the dugout. He chewed the shell of a sunflower seed—crunching the salty shell.

“Your coach should have you batting clean-up,” Dad said on the way back to the car.

“What’s that mean?”

“It’s fourth. Fourth in the line-up. That’s where they put Babe Ruth because they knew the first three would get on base somehow and then the ‘clean up’ cleans the bases with a homerun.”

The gravel crunched beneath our sneakers.

“I’m going to hit a homerun next game against Blue.”

“Damn straight.”

I never hit a homerun in five seasons of softball—only in practice

Second pitch: ball. High & outside.

“That was a strike you pussy!” second basemen, Shawn, remarked.

“It was out to fucking Mars,” Alex quipped.

Kenny shrugged. He smacked dirt off his mitt.

Daniel took a lead towards third & Jack took a lead towards home—skittish—skinny-legged boys—hearts snare drum beating in throats—

Kenny whirled around & stared down the two boys trailing from their bases.

“Focus on the hitter,” Shawn said.

Dad kicked at the dirt outside of the batter’s box. Two outs. He surveyed the dugout full of chubby-faced boys staring from underneath their caps.

On the desktop computer I looked up pictures of Babe Ruth.

I liked to think of myself like him.

I didn’t play soft ball like the girls on my team.

They used to use these neon headbands to keep their long hair tied up. One time Aubrey asked me why I didn’t wear one & I said, “I don’t have any hair to put in a ponytail. There’s nothing to keep back.”

Sometimes the girls would poke their stomachs & say “Look I’m a fatty.” They giggle at each other’s tiny pinch of fat.

I was chubby—my face like Babe Ruth’s—full of rice krispie treats & hot dogs with mustard & relish.

My stomach spilled over the tight waist of my baseball pants.

If this were a real “baseball story” Dad would have hit a home run.

The game would end—dusk falling as he smacked the baseball over the fence like all good baseball stories.

“Strike three!”

The ball walloped into the catcher’s glove.

Dad didn’t swing.

He stood there—not knowing where to move.

The boys began to loosen—jog in from the field & take off their hats. “Good game,” they said to each other.

Dad stayed in the box—the other boys dispersed.

Dad hit plenty of homeruns.

He told me sometimes he'd pick at pitch that was a ball & hit a homerun with it just to be fancy.

Bottom of the ninth.

Two outs.

I was Babe Ruth. Hungry. Round-faced. Bat-clutched. Dad standing to watch from by the dugout.

He never sat when I was up.

The bases were (actually) loaded.

The Teal team was down by six in the last inning.

It was 9:30 at night which was late.

The lights harvested fistfuls of moths. June watched the game silently—her warmth singing of cicadas. The stars were only fireflies.

“Are you coming Bill? It's pretty late to stay,” Kenny said.

“Just a second,” he said.

Kenny nodded & walked away—across the field street lamp sidewalks flickered.

June was quieter than usual.

Cold began to nestle in for the night. He crossed his legs & brushed dirt off his thighs—picked at sand-grits under fingernails—

Dad sat in the dugout.

Batting clean-up.

I peered over at dad & he nodded.

“You got it Sarah!” he shouted.

“We want a pitcher not a belly-itcher!” one girl from my team started & the rest joined in.

I shifted my weight from side to side.

Blink.

Of course I struck out.

How could I not have struck out?

Blink.

I felt it breeze by—watching some movie reel of me pointing at left field like Babe Ruth—like that pitch from inside the batting cage—I made up a story of the ball, flying over the outfielder's head—far far down the hill.

Blink.

The teams lined up.

Blink.

“Good game, good game.”

By the time, I realized I had struck out I was walking towards Dad. I was hit with a wave of shame. I pretended to need a drink from the water fountain to prolong our departure.

We drove home with the roof off the jeep.

I took off my white visor.

“I'm sorry,” I said. I ate a chocolate chip chewy bar from my backpack—dropped the wrapper on the car floor.

Dad stood— back of the batter’s box—maroon sky like a scabby knee.
He scanned to make sure no one was around, raising his wooden baseball bat &
pointed to the left field where the homerun should have landed.
He took position & swung at the invisible pitch.

“You had a great double in the second inning,” Dad said.
“Can we go to the batting cage tomorrow?”

I have this dream

Propane thick phantom—
Body house bone—looming
step—window frame—
door-hinge flame—

*they say that fire
is the most painful way
to die—*

gas—crawling—
spider-like—
this kindling
web—this fuse—
this house is a fuse—

Inquirer reports row homes
On Chestnut singed last night
Gas fire--

Smoldering carcasse—

empty scent before
ash fall—a cherry
blossom snow—
on sidewalk
on car hood—carpet blaze
fire melting our shoes—

those bodies sealed inside
candle wick
skeletons

closests
& hallways—greedy with air

*12 died slowly
on Chestnut—*

*those lock-door
children*

I see fire coming for
us next—
basement door—
screen window—the neighbors

got a gas heater

*they say it's
perfectly, perfectly
safe*

Kiss

We sat on the blue bench—other first graders laughing—jungle gym crawling. I was wearing my rainbow crocs & favorite t-shirt dotted with neon tree frogs.

“I wish I had a dog,” I said, digging my shoe into the wet playground mulch. “My parents won’t let me have a dog.”

“If I married you I’d let you have all the dogs you wanted,” Killian said.

Killian had a chubby face & short red hair. He wore a striped red & yellow shirt.

We didn’t run around during recess because September was humid & it made our clothing stick to us from the sweat. The air was even more soupy because it had just rained—asphalt dark black as other children slammed down red bouncy balls—used the basketball net as base.

A fat worm wriggled across the pavement & Killian picked it up.

“Look at him!”

“He needs a wife,” I said.

I found the worm a nice translucent grub to take for a spouse.

We set them under the big oak tree where the ground was muddy.

“Stay on the asphalt!” the first grade teacher Mrs. Kennedy yelled at us—proceeding to blow her silver whistle.

Killian & I leaned down to get one last survey of the lovely couple. Killian stared right at me. He had blue eyes. He tilted his head—raising an eye brow. “Will you marry me?”

I shrugged. “Sounds good. Okay.”

We looked at each other.

“Can I kiss you now?” he asked.

“Kiss?”

“Yeah.”

“Sure.”

He pecked me on the lips. The kiss was slimy like the rain & I wiped it off on the back of my hand.

John sat next to Pris. Alphabetical seating of course. Connor & Cullen.

Pris surveyed out the window. The clouds were warm & fluffy like those swirls of soft serve vanilla ice cream on the pier at Wildwood. She bounced her knee like she always did right before recess.

John glanced over at her—sheepishly.

The ticking of the clock resonated as the kids’ pens scratched vocab words into their second-grade grammar books.

John brushed Pris’s calf with his shoe.

She flinched & turned to him—frowning her brow. She crossed her arms—scowling.

He looked away—pretending to be pre-occupied with writing the word “friend” in cursive.

When she turned her attention back to the workbook he moved his foot again.

Pris whirled around to glare at John, dropping her pencil in the process. The click of pencil on tile floor didn’t seem to disturb the other students either working diligently or lost in their own daydreams.

In front of the rows of desks, Sister Margaret was leaning back in her chair—reading her own pocket prayer book.

Pris turned back to John.

He smiled at her this time when he brushed her foot with his shoe.

She blushed a little & stifled a smile.

This had been going on for a few grammar classes now. Always in silence. A back & forth—brushing against each other’s legs briefly with their dress shoes. She tore off the corner of her workbook page.

“Do you know how to kiss a girl?” she scribbled.

John unfurled the paper in his lap & raised his eye brows. He flushed.

Pris smiled as she finished the last sentence in her work book & set her pencil down again—folding her hands in her lap.

The bell caught them both off guard.

In the cacophony of the class getting up to go outside Pris stood up & pecked John. His lips were colder than she thought they would be.

“I dare you—I dare you to kiss me then!” Patrick said.

He stood—a proud eight-year-old boy. We were playing in his back yard between the two willow trees. This had started as a game of “dare or dare” because only girls played “truth or dare” and I was decidedly a tomboy.

I tackled him—pinning him down in the grass.

We liked to play rough. He was nearly twice my size. His t-shirt was tight around his belly & he had brown curly hair.

This time we were both mutant dinosaur people. I was part Velociraptor & he was part Spineosaur.

“Kiss you?” I asked.

He shrugged. “If you’re chicken I can try an easier dare.”

“No... I’m not...” I declared.

I blinked & searched around a moment—checking over my shoulder to make sure his mom wasn’t approaching to call us in for dinner.

The kiss was sloppy & brief.

Patrick hugged me & we rolled down the hill to the rocky bank of the stream where we resumed our prehistoric battle.

Pris swiped the red rubber ball from Harold & tossed it right at Daniel’s head. She missed.

Michael laughed & teased, “This is why girls can’t play dodge ball—they’re no good.”

Meanwhile Daniel scooped up the ball & dinged Michael in the head.

“That was hard!” Michael complained.

“You’re out,” Daniel said.

“That’s not fair.”

“Well you didn’t dodge,” Pris said—catching Harold’s toss against her chest. “Out!” she shouted.

The game was down to her & Daniel.

Daniel put the ball behind his back.

“I have an offer,” he said.

“What?”

“A truce—we call it a tie if you kiss me.”

The boys around the outside of the circle “Oooed” & “Ahhed”.

Pris glanced around. Sister Alice wasn’t watching. She was talking to Brother Christian over by the benches.

She smiled smugly.

“Sure.”

Daniel raised his eye brows. “What really?”

“Sure—a truce.”

He put the ball under his arm & they kissed in the middle of the dodge ball circle. She slapped the ball out of his hand & pegged him with it.

“I win!”

“Have you kissed anyone?”

“No... never,” I said.

The vestibule of the high school was always a little sticky feeling. March fog clouded the windows that morning.

“Never?”

He crossed his arms—corralling me between the brick wall & his tall stocky body. As I got older fear & love sometimes appeared too similar to tease apart.

Quickened heart beat—

“Nope.”

He leaned in & grabbed the back of my hair—more or less passionately.

He kissed me like a vacuum cleaner.

Pris stood on the step-stool to reach the top shelf of books at the library. She was looking for a book on the revolutionary war for Brother Stevens composition homework.

“Need help?” Evan asked.

He was a tall boy with dark brown hair & tragically thick glasses.

“Oh—I’m good,” Pris whispered.

She wobbled a little on the stool.

“Let me help you down,” he said—extending a hand.

“I’m good—thank you.”

He took a step forward. “You ought to let people help you doll.”

She clutched another book she had been holding to her chest. He put his arm across her path.

“Do you have a date to the Freshman Frolic?”

“I’m not going,” she laughed.

“You could go with me,” he said, leaning in.

He put his hand behind her neck & pecked her on the cheek. He smelled strongly of licorice.

She walked away & wiped the kiss off on the back of her hand.

I laid on my back under the dead oak tree on cemetery hill. Kutztown wore a crown of street lights.

Jess opened the fifty-cent honey bun from Turkey hill & chomped down.

“Want a bite?”

“No I’m good.”

Chewing she said between crumbs, “Oh—I’m sorry. I forgot—you’re—“

“It’s okay,” I said. “I’m okay.”

Jess moved her fingers around mine & rolled over on her side.

The ground was cold.

I rolled over on my side too. Taking each other in for a second—she then moved closer to me.

She smelled like sugar & honey glaze.

Pop-pop pulled up to the house on regimental road. The engine of the pick-up sputtered & clicked.

“I had a great time,” Pris said. “I felt like I was in grade school.”

Pop-pop smiled & gripped the steering wheel tight. He breathed deep.

Pris unbuckled her seat belt.

“Hey Pris.”

“Yes?”

“Do you think I could kiss you?”

She glanced over her shoulder to see if her sisters or mother were peering at them from the bay window. The curtains were drawn.

“Please do.”

He tasted like root beer barrels.

“I wanted to kiss you last time I saw you—but I don’t know when it’s right to kiss someone anymore,” I said. I held his hand.

His porch light painted us into shadows.

Burial

Sarah

I have never felt like my name fit me.

I used to make nicknames up for myself. In fifth grade I was “pollywog” (from “Gow” spelled backwards). I was “Saga” in sixth grade because I wanted to sound like a journey. They never stuck—I always ended up being “SareBear” or just “Sarah”. When I was being confirmed in the Catholic church I took identity in my chosen name—a native American Martyr “Kateri Tekakwitha”. Originally, I had wanted to use the name “Frances” for Saint Frances. He was the patron saint of animals. On his prayer card, he was sitting in the sunlight underneath a lush tree. Frances seemed so happy. So calm. So gentle. I wanted to love God like that—like sitting in the sun.

My catechist clarified that it was typical for students to choose saints of their “own gender”.

“You didn’t even talk about any other names?” I asked Mom.

“No—why? It was ‘Sarah’ or ‘William.’” Mom leaned back, scrolling on her iPhone.

“Nothing at all? That’s so lame.”

“Your father loved his grandmother very much,” she said after a pause. She peered up at me from her screen. I swiveled my stool at the breakfast counter.

I guess I had hoped that my parents had some other name that they considered for me. They had originally thought I was going to be a “boy” and settled on my grandfather’s name—“William.” Three years later they would name my brother that.

I have told my parents I’m transgender but I haven’t asked Dad to call me “Robin”. It seems too soon. Dad picked my name. I know “Sarah” is a piece of us. “Sarah” is a piece of him. If I could I would tell him I love Sarah too. I love the Sarah I was and the Sarah where I came from. Sarah, my great grandmother.

Sarah picked out Dad’s clothing all the way through high school.

She held up another dress pants & blazer combo. Dad sighed. He didn’t protest. His legs were sore from following her around the men’s section of Gimble’s. She was searching for an outfit “suitable attire for afterschool”. He went to Mother of the Divine Providence, so they had uniforms. After school, he liked to throw on an old t-shirt & shorts to escape the uniform’s tightness.

Sarah said, “A gentleman should always look his best.” She added, “even after school.”

“Hold out your arm,” she instructed as she clipped a pair of cuff links to his white dress shirt.

Dad felt like his whole body was buttoned together. “The collar scratches at my neck.”

“You’ll get used to it honey. It’s what young men wear. You’re a young man now.”

“For a basketball game?” Dad asked. “I think the other guys are just gonna wear rugby shirts or something.”

“Of course, this is what you wear—you never know who you’ll meet. It’s because the other boys don’t have a grandmother to help them out.”

He watched himself in the full-length mirror outside the dressing room. The suite’s sleeves were a little bit too long for him.

“Oh dear—we’ll need another size then.”

He followed her back out to the racks.

“Mother loved to cook for everyone,” Flo remarked. Sarah flits through conversations—she’s very much alive in the Aunt’s house. “I loved mother—it was such a shame when she died—she loved those boys.”

By “those boys” Aunt Flo means my sixty-year-old father & fifty-eight-year-old uncle Rich—but to them they will always be “those boys”. Those boys in in baseball shirts—playing records in the basement—taking off their shoes & leaving them at the foot of the stairs for someone to trip on—

The Aunt’s stories about Sarah are always strikingly domestic.

Sarah took the place of Dad’s mom when she died. It’s true the Aunts shared the weight—but they didn’t carry it like Sarah did. Sarah sewed for him—set the table—silver fork to the left—knife to the right—then the spoon--hunk of chicken casserole scooped onto Dad’s plate for Sunday dinner—

Sarah pet his hair when he felt empty & had no words—she knotted his white socks & sat with him on the porch in the summer—he drank lemonade resting from an afternoon on the tennis courts.

She gleamed from the end of the row at his graduation.

Sarah watched him on the stage through the entire ceremony—her movie reel whirled.

Dad was her second son. He was becoming a man. She saw him growing—He would pass priests in their full Cassocks on his way to class at Villanova—he would study business like a sensible man does—he would fall in love with a nice Catholic girl—he would get a job with pension—he would wear nice navy suites with gold cuff links—he would kneel in the second row of pews for mass each Sunday & on Sunday nights he would come home—home to her house where he would always belong.

Sarah was a writer of children. A writer of futures—a mother to four daughters and two sons and now a mother again. Dad was the one with the grades. He was the one with the tangible future. Uncle Rich was an artist so she didn’t push him the same way. Sarah sat with Dad while he put the postage stamp on the Villanova application. She told him how great it would be to be a businessman like her son, Jack. Sarah had the formula for growing good young men—

She wanted what was best—I know.

Dad never had a passion for business— he keeps chapter books stacked by his bedside. He leaves Civil War magazines dog-eared on the bathroom sink. He writes in the margins of poetry books. He owns every single Kurt Vonnegut book. He quotes Hunter S. Thompson nearly every family dinner. When I was little he read to me until I fell asleep.

My father’s world—his love—is so rooted in books.

I wish Sarah could have seen that or knew what that meant.

Business was just what success looked like for her. She was just trying to show that she loved him.

Dad dropped out of college three years in.

Off handily Dad said, “I could have been an English major... maybe History.”

I imagine love used to be easier for them.

When Dad was in middle school he reenacted as a revolutionary war soldier at Valley Forge. Together, Sarah & him leaned over bunched up cloth. Sarah taught Dad how to fashion square-headed period-accurate buttons. They couldn't use a sewing machine because the stitching needed be authentically hand-done. She pricked her finger. Dad brought her a napkin to dab up the tiny speck of blood. He took over for her. He tried to weave the needle in & out. His line of stiches were wonky. He held up his work to show her. She smiled & she plucked the jacket from him. She ripped out the row—slowly snipping each black thread. Lightly & patiently she said, “No, look, like this.”

Dad watched the needle—glinting beneath the desk lamp at her sewing table. Even when she didn't need help Dad sat there.

“Would you have liked to be a soldier?”

“I don't think so. I think it was cold,” Dad said. “I could have managed though.”

“Why be one know then?”

“I like to pretend... to learn.”

From the Malvern library Sarah found Dad books about the revolution. Worn blue & maroon covers—she stacked them on his desk.

“Yes, like that,” she said. “Tuck your hand inside you jacket.” She snapped a picture of him standing in full uniform when the outfit was finally complete. He was standing in the rec room next the framed picture of JFK.

I admire her for that—for that kind of love made from the work of her hands—it's the kind of love a distant & often frustrated boy like Dad probably needed at age ten living in a new area with a new school in the house of his three aunts who were all also mourning the loss of his mother. It was & is a silent mourning—a mourning so cavernous that emptiness still lives in the walls & the picture-frames of their house on Regimental Road.

Could there ever be enough room in a house like that to grieve?

Mom tells me that the Aunts used to drink Manhattans after Dad's mom died. Drunkenly, they'd blame Pop-pop for her death. “Making her work so hard.”

The Aunts needed someone to blame. God lived up the street in a tabernacle. He wore white. He burned an oil candle. Their God knew they said “Hail Mary”s. Their God watched them take the Eucharist on their tongues. No, their God was not to blame for the death of their sister. Their God was a witness.

Sarah was never like that. Sarah never blamed anyone for death. She took death differently. She was gentle & sturdy. She was someone to lean on even if she could only love in the form of lamp lights & wooden buttons for a revolutionary war soldier who was also my father. He was also a boy not ready for the war. Would he have been a drummer boy? Would the sound of his drum sticks have pattered like sleet?

“Are you crying?” she asked Dad. He was sitting in the living room playing with his metal cars.

“No,” Dad said, wiping his nose.

He had moved in a week earlier.

“I don't cry.”

Sarah nodded. She sat on the sofa next to him.

He began to cry.

“You can miss her. We can miss her together.”

“She liked the blue car best,” Dad said—holding up the metal Volkswagen. Sarah took the toy.

“She would have looked good driving one.”

I do have pictures of Sarah. She’s not a very large woman. Thick glasses like aunt Mary & her hands are folded in her lap. She’s wearing a long plaid dress with an apron. She has a poof of hair—grey & smoky like a gentle passing rain storm. There’s another one of her smiling with her eyes closed—teeth showing & goofy. In a lot pictures, she’s in the background cutting birthday cakes—picking up dish towels—holding the house together by her apron strings—the seamstress to make the soldier’s uniform.

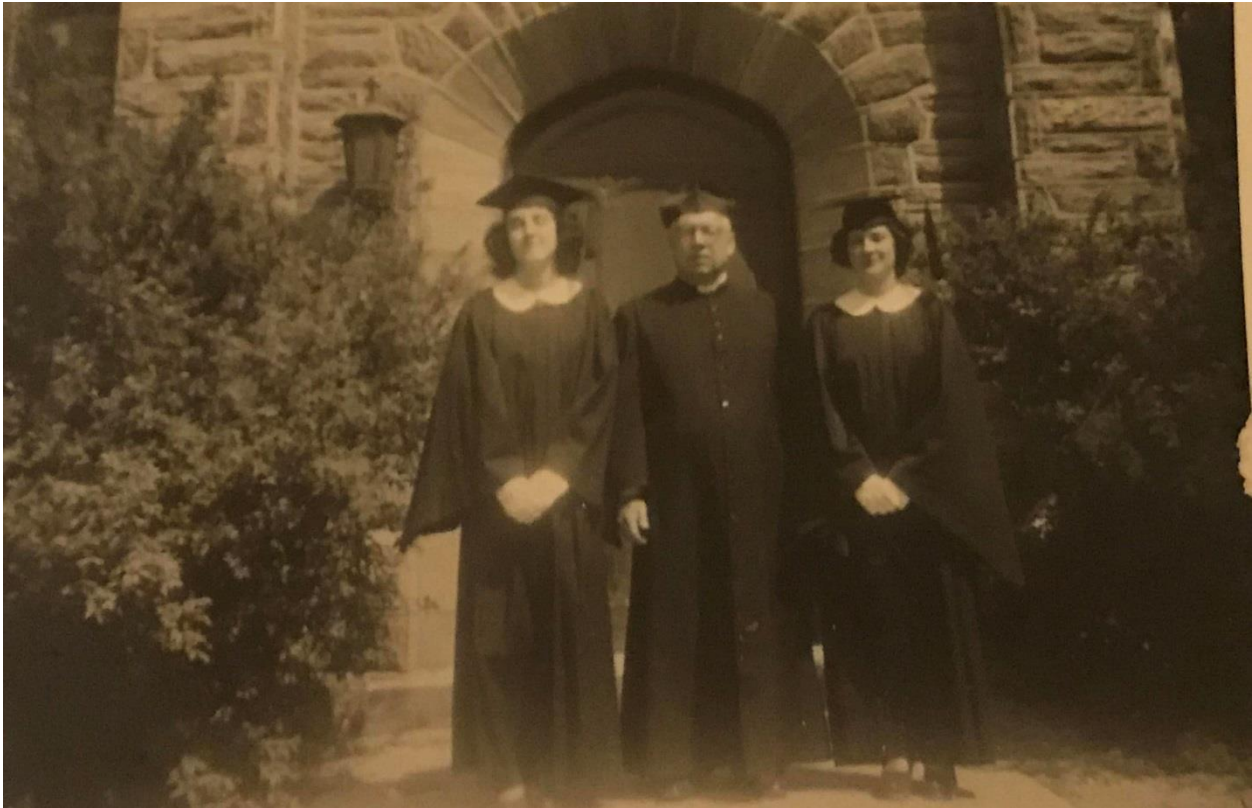
Sarah baked pies from the pears that grow on the tree in the backyard. After she died no one has baked anything with the pears again.

Some years the tree doesn’t bear fruit but the Aunts don’t notice because they don’t go back there anymore—they don’t want to bake pies—to them it’s just the tree that sometimes drops green pears—rotting into a mash on the lawn & attracting bees.

I go back there every time I visit to check & when there’s green pears in the yard I gather them up in a plastic shopping bag. They’re always crunchy & not really close to being ripe. I keep telling myself I’m going to bake a pear pie.

I would be her great-gran-son. She could make me a uniform for me this winter. We could sit up all night in front of a desk lamp & maybe she’d remind me how to attach a button—take my picture in the rec room & I’d look like my Dad—

It’s a pear year—the year I changed my name.



Where is my grandmother buried?

*Calvary Cemetery
West Conshohocken*

what kind of heaven
do we stand on?

Above she heard
black canvas shoes—
a bouquet of
Hail Marys

She remembered
Our voices

& my tongues, wind
chimes once hanging
on her porch--
ring through
her teeth

roots of the grass
held hands—
wove a sky for her

soil & dirt—
Joan's fresh
burial plot—
plastic lilies
& wilting white
carnations

*Priscilla Connor
1939-1972*

*Joan Connor
1943-2014*

No—I mean *where*
is *she* buried?

I dug her bones
from picture frame
caskets—

i had to be
sure she wasn't
assumed like
saint mary

a baby blue dress—
to sleep in

*a serene resting place
for the faithful
departed since 1945*

the dead keep their
shoes at the front door—

white nurse shoes—
stained from
crawling out of
her grave

all fours—muddy knees—

she was a tulip bulb
we planted
my faith
is in our gardens—

what kinds of
walls will our skeletons
grow into?

My grandmother's buried
in my poetry

*visitors can pray with
their loved ones
amidst rolling hills &
beautiful cemetery features
such as a 30-foot tall cross
atop the highest hill*

that's where she's buried—
the highest highest hill—

out the car window—
always growing—

Poconos—Mount Penn—
Appalachian trail
of a dream—

i walk a path of
open graves unfilled—

& there she is jumping in—
sending ripples
through earth—

she's on lake bottoms—

minnow thrumming
on my skin—

my grandmother
burying herself over
& over & over

Are you afraid of the dark?

Our eyes window-wide

Priscilla: eight years old—peels vagrant dark
off her scab shoulders—infesting shadows—
she bleeds black between bed posts: inkwell mark—

Train tracks catch him—sky full of black-throat crows
calling as Father falls: led leaf drop—
railroad stain scream: her pink mouth shut to sew

eight years old: watching dusk's indigo throb—
blanket over head—threat of a closet—
doors shadow clenching—teeth preen green tree top

there's angels bursting from their white outlets—
pulse the embryotic pillow case
i want to keep myself in a locket

Mom prays for night lights to paint my pale face
while Saint Mary mother laughs ceiling blue
& Saint Michael plots another devil chase
our day of battle dips—orange-red hue
sun in silver spoon—lifted to my lips—
our breakfast served from the wooden church pew

there is no remedy for midnight's hips—
Our Father Our Father/ Who art the light
of Street lamps—Father built basement warships

i take my stone cross & curl up rock tight—
Pray again to Saint Michael Saint Michael
He knew something about consuming night

Devil's blood & the red lunar cycle
what could he have known of our girlhood fear?
Moonlit: bedroom God—humble disciples

Priscilla listens: Flo, Mary, & Joan here
dream drenched—she pulls her thick quilt covers round
—a wet chrysalis—she will disappear

& we'll stir our red open mouth moon sound
i'll whisper "we are, we are still afraid"
holding hands in the moon's burial ground

We could keep driving—

I thought maybe you would be a
greyhound bus love
kind of boy

Who doesn't want to be run away with?

Do you remember the picnic at Valley Forge?
When you had to chase me up the hill & I told you
that if you followed me behind the next row
Of oak trees that I would never go back—

Billy & Rich are in the back seat—

why don't you lay down with them—
why don't we all
lay down in a parking
lot & pretend we

don't have house—

there would be no
Where we'd ever have to go

We could all find a lake
& I could float my nurse's hat
out like a little boat &
walk in the mud with
my white shoes—

I know I know I wouldn't do that
but let me imagine it—

We could take the boys out
of school & they could
Learn the names of
all the state capitals
driving there—

unfolding maps from the glove box—

You could fix up cars
On the way & we could make
enough to get by

What's 'enough' to get by?

Enough cracked windows
Enough hotel bibles
Enough blankets to
make the back seats
into front porches &
A bed room & an attic

Where everyone keeps
Their favorite stars—

We could keep driving—

Let's switch now—
You've been going too long

Stay awake with me though
won't you?

Hold Still

There's a picture of Priscilla holding a baby. The black & white of the photograph make it too hard to tell whether it's Dad or Uncle Rich—the baby is wearing all white & so it shows up like a flash of light—a blur of sun—one little shoe visible against her dark dress.

She's standing there in the front lawn of the Aunt's house. Well, back then it was her own house & her mother's house.

Her shoes are as white as the sun beam baby in her arms—the heels dig into the lawn & she's turned towards the camera as if about to say something to the person holding it—

The Aunts can't tell me who took the picture so I assume it was Mother—eager at the arrival of her first grandchild—Dad—a baby boy—a baby flash of sun—she instructs her daughter in their picture to turn & smile & hold still for the camera—stop fussing with him long enough to get a good picture—adjusts her arm—shoulders achy from holding him—mid word the photo is snapped—

Before him, she lost a baby named “Linda”.

There's a difference between unborn children & unborn children with names.

The Aunts only brought it up to me a few months ago—I was asking about what they would have named Dad if he were a girl (I wasn't sure if they could tell the sex of babies before they were born back then) & Aunt Mary said, matter-of-fact, “Oh she had a miscarriage—the baby would have been named ‘Linda’ so probably would have named him Linda I guess. It was a popular name.”

“A miscarriage named Linda?” I asked.

“A baby—she was far along,” Aunt Mary explained.

I was surprised that in all the stories about Dad or his family or all the times my aunts had told me that I was “so much like” Priscilla that this anecdote had never emerged—especially because it didn't seem like the kind for thing that would be an anecdote.

Priscilla lost her first baby & talked about her enough that the family knew what her name was.

I imagine her telling Pop-pop she was pregnant in their living room. She bounces her knee before letting him know—taps a pen on the crossword puzzle in her hands—pretends to be reading—glances over at him a few times.

Saturday morning & neither of the have to work. They keep mornings quiet—let the sound of cardinals & other song birds in the tree outside disperse the silence. They shared a breakfast of French toast & ham & eggs & orange juice with their coffee.

“Bill?” she asks.

He doesn't look up right away because he's not used to talking this early.

“Bill?” she leans toward him.

“Mhm?”

“Can we talk about something?”

He sets the paper down & perks up attentively. It's not something Priscilla would say—she doesn't start conversations like that.

“Bill I think we're having a baby.”

He smiles a little funny—like you do when you receive a compliment. He hesitates a moment & lets the words sit with them in the room—expanding—taking up more space—

“I’ll make a crib!” he finally responds.

Priscilla bursts out laughing.

“What? What?”

“At least I know you’re excited,” she says.

He didn’t ask any questions. He let her pick out the name. He wouldn’t have known how to pick it anyway.

“If it’s a girl Linda & a boy William—like you.”

“My son won’t be a junior—that’s awful to have people start callin you ‘junior’.”

“Well alright—a different middle name then—maybe ‘Arthur’?”

“Just no ‘juniors’.”

I don’t know how the baby was miscarried. I don’t really like that choice of the word “miscarriage” as if the woman “missed” or “messed” something up that would cause the baby to leave—“leaving” that’s what I think she would have thought of it as—a baby that never stayed.

She would go to the hospital—a place she knew well with women—some she had gone to school with & they would tell her one way or another that the baby had left & that they would have to remove her—

Her—she would learn the baby was a “her” only after the body was removed from her own..

At home, Pop-pop wouldn’t ask any questions. He would sit next to her on the sofa in the mornings together & once—only once she would cry & he would know it was about the baby that left & no one would call her ‘Linda’ but they would be discomfited to partake in the collective knowledge that that was in fact her name.

In this picture I’m holding Priscilla is mid-word as her mother tries to get just the right image of her daughter—also now a mother—holding a baby who stayed while everyone one pretended like one had never left—

I think my grandmother carried her girl as a haunting feeling—saving the little ribbons her friends had given her—keeping them in the bottom of her dresser & never telling anyone—

Outside of her the girl grew—grew up with her sons—a ghost—watching a family unfurl around her—waiting sometimes in the living room up at night—imagining herself in family photographs & listening for her mother’s footsteps on nights when she was restless.

She clung to the sound of her name in her mother’s throat as proof of her own existence.

Mother tried to take another picture—no thought of the dead baby girls.

“Wait just one second—I just want one good picture of the two of you.”

“Shh, he’s sleeping,” Priscilla said. “If I stop rocking him he’ll wake up.”

What happens to you when I stop writing?

we owned these rivers—
our shared veins

this has been a promise
to unfurl your language

meandering barefoot tongues—
balanced on mossy stones—

you—in an off-white
Sunday dress—hem lapping—
breeze running
fingers through your
hair—we grip
each other's arms to
keep from stumbling—

so much like sisters—

oh, if i had a sister
she would have dark brown
hair & broad shoulders
like you—

how much of you
have i written?

How much of myself have
i re-packaged in
your bones?

there is always
more than one burial—

you—the dog-eared page—
the open cookie
jar by the leaky sink—

i put your name in my
mouth & bit down—
slipped your shoes
on my feet—became
a nurse—drew blood
from my forearms—

these—our waters—
we run clear—

i don't know
where to burry you now—
dirty fingernails &
grass stained knees—

this morning
i told myself it was okay
to stop writing
without an answer

What happens to you
when i stop writing?

Your granite face—

shovel leaning
on tombstone—legs dangling—
humming *Ave Marie*—

How to Blow Up a Whale

The story I re-tell the most about my grandfather is the one where he accidentally blew up a whale in the navy.

Americans were stationed in Brazil during World War II to locate German U-Boats under the water. They'd sit listening for "German" voices—drop a marker for the war ship to know where to torpedo-fire the U-Boat into oblivion. That's what was supposed to happen at least—Pop-pop said that no one he worked with ever actually achieved the goal of the whole operation.

"U-Boats" are basically just submarines. German's were using them to blow up Brazilian ships, specifically cargo loads. Thus, America, as usual, valiantly swooped in to make a mess of things further. From what I can find, beyond Pop-pop's accounts, no German U-Boats were ever actually destroyed by Americans stationed in Brazil.

In the control room sits my grandfather.

A nineteen-year-old boy. Bouncing his knee—tapping a pencil on the panel lightly—he checks his watch.

He didn't enjoy contemplating the procedure he would have to execute if he were to hear German voices as he listened on bulky headphones.

There he sits on into the night as the sonar scans the warm foreign ocean. Sticky & hot & smelling like sweat—he fidgets

His uniform makes him itchy all over—he has never grown accustomed to the stark texture of the fabric.

He rests his head on the control board for a moment.

The other boy with him has already dozed off.

He is a nice kid named Hank from South Carolina with a slow way of talking.

Pop-pop didn't like him much at first, but he was growing on him.

They shared a lot of night shifts—sometimes you come to appreciate someone based on proximity alone. They liked to talk about what they were going to do when they got back to the states—after everything was over.

"I'm going to buy a car," Hank would say. "Then I'm going to find this girl—Liza—and we're going to settle down. We promised. She's back there waiting for me. She's a good girl."

"I don't have a girl back home—I have one here."

"Here? What are you kidding," Hank would say. "We all got a girl here—hell we got GIRLS here—it's the bounty of war. We got the best picks too—never knew gentlemen down here. Think of it Bill, we could have gotten stuck in god damn Japan with nothing but skinny little gals everywhere. We are God's chosen people—down here in Brazil of all the places."

"We wouldn't be seeing girl in Japan—I mean they're the enemy. I don't think they'd be inclined anything fun—"

He nodded. "True. I guess you're right there but—you know what I mean about the girls."

"French girls wouldn't be bad," Pop-pop said after thinking for a few moments—sonar blipping in the background. "I hear that they're loose."

"Oh all women are loose— that's their secret—you just got to get them to stop pretending for ya—war makes everyone loose really."

“I don’t think American women are.”

“You haven’t been around enough—when you get back you’ll figure out more. Hell, I’ll show you around Billy boy.”

Pop-pop didn’t especially enjoy talking about women with Hank but it just sort of always sprang up. It was kind of the assumed point of bonding. Hank was ten years older—a kind of unwanted older brother. Hank gave out pointers no one really wanted or asked for.

Pop-pop day dreamed about the woman he had met on shore. Ana. The girl who told him to stay. He promised he would. He had never promised anyone something like that—the words circling in his head while he tried to sleep in his bunk.

She taught him how to say “Goodnight” and “I love you” in Portuguese. To the other boys on the ship he made sure to talk about her like she was a fling—another dark-skinned woman to keep navy boys held over till they could find their American girls back home. Alone in his bunk he felt different. He felt like a part of him meant what he was saying—meant to stay—wanted to stay with her. He meant what he had said—at least he believed that he meant what he said—the words they used to whittle away the moon from her bed—*boa noite boa noite*—

He thought a lot about church—if it was true—about being faithful & being pure & making honest women & families & body & blood & Jesus. Everyone did it—he told himself—everyone slept with women. It was just something no one talked about—it was what young men were meant to do.

Until that night in the control room he hadn’t started to think about the logistics of bringing a woman back with him. He imagined Ana arriving at his parent’s house on Canal Street. He was imagining coming to the front door with Ana—her long brown hair pulled back & her body in a plaid dress & white shoes like the girls at the station he left from. It was a muddled image & he knew it wasn’t a future that would ever happen. He imagined her barefoot—she was always looking for the first opportunity to take off her shoes--carrying them by the heels while together they snuck into her room in the depths of night—

He tried to formulate the conversation he’d have with his officer. He would explain that he was going to make an honest woman of her. He couldn’t think of a single way to start. He saw the stoic scowl of Sargent Marcus. He bit his lip. He tried to see this young Brazilian woman getting off a train with him at 30th street station. He knew it wasn’t something that he would ever get to see.

Hesitating he thought maybe if he asked God he might get an answer. The only way he knew to ask God anything was by saying the “Our Father”. He prayed it every night before bed & muttered it when he felt especially lost. He actually had little notion as to what it was supposed to mean. He said it a lot especially when they were traveling & when the nights got long at the sonar panel. Hank fell asleep quite frequently past 3am. “Our Father” kept Pop-pop company.

A low voice comes over the sonar—a voice so deep & meandering my grandfather isn’t sure it was the voice of God.

The voice comes—a cry of fear or relief out but no sound comes out.

He stops breathing listening closer—the sound decidedly not human—a kind of voice that Pop-pop felt deep inside his chest—vibrating his bones.

He feels compelled to apologize. For everything he had done.

He asks God not to take him—that he would love Ana like a man should—he wouldn't give up. He wouldn't leave.

In the little room—sweaty & dimly lit he gets on his knees & the voice gets faster—slower—deeper & still deeper.

He wants to answer back but doesn't know how to speak God-languages: he just moves his lips to the "Our Father".

The voice stopping as he stands up.

He surveys the controls—frantic as if he has broken the phenomenon—as if he has silenced God.

Hank blinks & hears the tail end of the God-voice & slaps his hand on the panel.

"The fuck are you doing Bill? You hear those fucking Germans gargling. "Fucking shit! That's when you wake me up!"

"Is that what German sounds like?" Pop-pop asked—terrified & still struck from his mis-encounter.

"You heard that right? It wasn't just me?"

"I—I thought I radioed it. I was just so—I just didn't know."

"Oh—let me show you—we're gonna get them—it's clear you see it? Right up there—" he said pointing to an amorphous shape on the screen. "They're still near by—we'll drop the marker—Bill this is great!" Hank boasted. "Fuck yeah buddy—we did it—we really did it."

Pop-pop absent mindedly proceeds to place the marker & miles away in the ocean a blue whale watches as dye disperses in the water—unable to know that within seconds a missile will rip through its body.

"We got em'! We got em' Billy!" Hank exclaims.

Something feels deeply wrong to my grandfather.

He hasn't yet thoroughly made peace with listening to the voice of what turned out to be Germans & not got & then removing them from this earth in the swift reverberation of weaponry.

It wasn't till they changed shifts that my grandfather learned the truth.

"It was... it was a whale," Commander Reilly informed him.

"A whale?" Pop-pop asked—as if it were going to be a joke.

"They found the carcass where they were searching for the pieces of the boat. We'll get them next time."

Alone in his bunk he looked up where another man slept above him. The ship felt entirely empty. He didn't want to pray.

He thought about the whale—voice spoke through sonar—so deep—as if pulling him down under meter after meter of water—gallons swallowing him—his body growing vast & blue as the ocean around him. He tried to repeat the words—tucking his tongue behind his teeth & still feeling that voice in his ribs.

He wanted someone to apologize to.

It didn't even feel right to apologize to the God he still vaguely believed in. The God who hadn't spoken to him.

He determined he wouldn't tell Ana—that he wouldn't talk about it. That he would leave the voice where he found it until his ribs stopped ringing.

The other boys liked to joke & Bill joked too that Germans were so dumb that their language almost sounded like that of whales. Pop-pop knew the whale spoke prayers no men in a metal ship could know.

He repeated the joke long enough until he believed it—decades later telling his sons the story of how he blew up a whale as if it a punch-line. Still—each time the ending—the reverberation of the explosive—it always left him feeling wrong—feeling empty—he would hear the words again over the sonar—

The next night he got up from his bunk & made his way to the side of the ship.

The deck was of course patrolled by other officers who glanced at him as he passed by. He made his way to the railing at the edge.

“You’re no going to jump are you?” one asked.

“Oh no—just can’t sleep,” he said.

Looking over he wished he had something to throw over the side of the ship. For an instant the other sailor put the idea in his head—he could jump & he could die in the same water as the whale—maybe hear the voice again make him feel like his body was real—the way Ana made him feel with her hands unbuttoning his uniform.

He resolved after some deliberation to not die—that that wasn’t what the voice would have wanted.

Where is my grandmother buried?—PII

“Do you still have any of her clothes?” I ask Aunt Mary. I’m sitting at the bar stools while they lean back in the blue & tan recliners.

“Oh...uh... I we got rid of most of that. That was so long ago.”

I pause. “Got rid?”

“Donated it—you know. We didn’t really have a need to keep all of that around.”

“Didn’t Joan take some of her dresses?” Flo puzzles. She flips channels monotonously.

“Oh... well maybe. I think maybe. Not really sure. There was so much stuff. It wouldn’t have even fit here.”

“Oh, I understand.” I say even though I don’t.

I’ve been thinking about my grandmother’s plot a Calvary Cemetery. I’ve been thinking about how empty the earth felt beneath my black Chuck Taylors. I’ve been thinking about the other places Priscilla must be buried if she isn’t there.

“Where did you donate them?”

Mary chuckles & shakes her heads slightly—“Oh it was so long ago. What are you asking for? We don’t have anything.”

We don’t have anything.

While I lived at the Aunt’s house I would go up into the attic—slanted roof—boxes on boxes toppling over each other. I found comic books—baseball cards—tinsel—a Barbie doll of princess Diana—nothing of Priscilla’s aside from a few letters & of course photographs.

Priscilla lives in a blur of black & white—an orphaned white glove at the bottom of a jewelry box—

What colors were her earrings?

Where these photograph shoes white or a deceptive yellow?

—yellow of golden ribbon or a baby blanket?

What colors existed in the threads of her eyes?

Brown—chocolate—yarn of green—hazel—yellow— rippled maple tree bark—

I want to know her colors.

Are there threads of hers sewn in me?

What kind of blanket do we make?

Here in the attic we hold each other—she’s so small—I want to open the door of each image & let her walk out—full color—

I have this vision of the dozens of women who might have worn her dresses.

There is a young girl—short blonde bob—green bangles—buys Priscilla’s wedding dress—back thrift store wrack—white is sun-faded—baby blanket yellow—lace at her waist she twirls—there my grandmother twirls in the smudged mirror at the thrift store—she is this girl I don’t know who buys a wedding dress at the thrift store—

There is a mother—she picks out a dress for her daughter—fourteen—just understanding the difference between a woman’s dress & a girl’s—what on earth is a girl anyway? She picks up one of Priscilla’s white pleated skirts—her daughter’s only instinct is to spin—my grandmother is fourteen again on the body of this girl in a thrift store dressing room—spinning—that’s what dresses are for—

I wish I had just one of those dresses.

Aunt Mary says, "They're all gone now. All her clothes. I don't remember what they looked like even if I saw them."

I want to tell her "I do."

I want to say "I remember what they look like"

I see them—dangling from high shelves—I'm pulling them free—a pile of blouses—her clothing falls—a cacophony of fabrics—

Here is your grandson—

how funny I am as I appear in her polka-dot scoop neck—getting black scuffs on heels—dancing clumsy—tile kitchen floor—

Here is your grandson—

I'm in a flowery apron & one of her outrageous Sunday church-going hats—feathers & silk scarves—a mess of her colors— all her colors—there's no room for black & white—

Priscilla is buried across this world.

I like to believe there might be Priscilla's long green dress packed in the suite case of some college student on her way to study abroad—Priscilla is green down the streets of London—Paris—Buenos Aires—She's a navy-blue hem bleeding into the horizon in Hong Kong--

Oh, look there she is—her cuff links as Saturn's rings—her shoe laces traced by comets—there she is—

A lopsided box of black & white photographs—

Who out there is walking in her black heels?

Do you write about us?

I wear dad's unplugged Rickenbacker guitar around my neck. I strum—rusted-strings twag. The strap is yellow—red checkered & frayed—

“I'm going to play guitar—will you teach me daddy?”

Dad straps on his red Stratocaster.

He plays *No Where Man*. It's my favorite.

I believed he wrote.

“Doesn't have a point of view—knows not where he's going to—isn't he a bit like you and me?”

“When I grow up I'm going to be in a band.”

“What about you Pris? Do you want to help Mommy with the lemon cake?”
Mother asks. Mary was usually the only one who got to help prepare Sunday dinner

“I want to make a cake,” Joan whines.

“You're too little,” Mother cooes & runs her hand through her daughter's hair.

“Are you coming Pris?”

“I think I want to finish writing,” she says—notebook open on the coffee table.

Mother shimmied over to sit next to her. “What are you on about?”

“I'm writing.”

“Writing what?”

“A book.”

Mother tilted her head & set the dish rag on the arm of the sofa. “What are you doing that for?”

“I'm going to write stories someday.”

Joan giggles.

Mother closes the book. “You can finish the story when you're done helping. You'll love it. You have to learn to cook so you can be helpful around the house someday.”

“When I grow up I'm going to live in the amazon,” I tell Mrs. Kenney's first grade class.

“Oh?”

“To study tree frogs. I love tree frogs—especially the blue ones. They're poisonous so if you ate them you would die—but like I would be careful.”

Mrs. Kenney nods & Jon in the front row says he wants to be a firefighter for the third time that class.

Katie says, “There's piranhas in the amazon.”

I let her know that “my dad says they don't eat you unless you are bleeding.”

“Better not let Pris help—she’ll burn the house down,” Joan teases as she skirts into the kitchen where Mother is candying rings of pineapple for Daddy’s birthday cake.

“I hear you,” Pris says—looking up from her grammar book.

“Hush dear, Pris is studious—Sister Ellen told me she’s ahead in her readings.”

“I’m behind in my readings,” Flo moans. “Am I not studious?”

“You’re just not the same kind of smart as Priscilla.”

Pris turns to the last page of the reading once everyone leaves the room. She wishes there was another. She imagines herself at a typewriter—a secretary typing her novels by the light of the moon in the window.

She sees herself coming home to a house. She imagines she’d have a husband waiting for her. He doesn’t have a face. She doesn’t know what a husband should look like.

“Australia?” Aunt Flo asks.

“Yeah—I’m going to move to Australia... or Arizona. I can’t remember which one has the big cactuses that Dad told me about.”

“Oh I don’t know. You wouldn’t want to say home around here?”

“No—Dad said he would move with me,” I say.

I’m in fifth grade. I’m building myself a ranch house with a huge sprawling fence. I breed pug dogs. My husband owns horses. We stay up late & drink iced tea on the porch. I have callous bare feet Mom.

“You’re pretty you know—you don’t have to go,” Flo says. Pris is laying on bed with her clothing in two duffle bags. Her side of the closet is bare.

“I want to though. I want to be a nurse... I have wanted to be a nurse.”

Flo rolls over on her side. “You don’t want to be a little wife for Jonny up the street?”

“Why Jonny?”

“He looks at you in church.”

Pris scowls. “He better not.”

“What’s so bad about that?”

“I like... I like being me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Pris bites her lip. “You know... I don’t know. I think I would like it though—I think I would like to help people and be me.”

Flo smiles.

“What?”

“You don’t want to be a writer?”

“I write...”

“We can move to New York together. I’ll be an actor and you can write books,” Jackie says—tilting the box of Cheezits towards me.

“I’m good,” I say.

The sidewalk is hot against out bare legs. I’m wearing a blue polka-dot dress & Jackie has on her black stage crew shirt.

I open my eyes & I’m gazing out an open window to the city bellow. A cacophony of horns echoes off the walls of the sky-scrappers. I have a desktop computer & a printer by my desk. I have a stack of papers—a manuscript for my next novel about demons & witches who fall in love—because everyone falls in love.

I’m in love with a girl with short blue hair. She plays guitar & lays on the sofa while I write in our small apartment.

“I was hoping to be a grandmother,” Mother says one night when it’s just her & Priscilla on the sofa. They’re listening to the news on the radio.

Pris turns down the knob.

“Now what’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re a nurse.”

“You say it as if I’m never going to have a family. I’m twenty-four.”

Mother’s eyes grow wide.

“Mother—I have time.”

“I don’t doubt that—who are you thinking of?”

“Thinking of?”

“Thinking of marrying then? Have you not told me?”

“Mother I just got a job. It will take time.”

Priscilla does want a baby—she views herself laying in a bed covered with pillows & blankets. She sees herself just holding him—close to her skin—his body so small & soft. She doesn’t imagine a husband—just a baby soft & wriggling like the ones she hold briefly in the maternity ward.

She goes up to her room & she writes a poem. The poem is about Dad—but not just Dad—also Rich & Billy & Joey & Me.

She writes a poem about a little boy.

“What do you want to do with that?”

“With what?”

“A degree in English?”

“I want to... I want to learn I guess. I think it’s just like—the only thing that’s really stuck. It makes me feel happy.”

“Are you going to write novels?” Dad asks after a silence between us. We’re in his blue jeep parked in the corn fields. He takes me on a ride. It’s Easter. The sun sets slowly.

“I write poetry mostly. Sometimes stories.”

“Do you write about us?”

I was trying to feel some kind of goodbye

-J.D.Salinger

One humid morning in June Dad moves out. His mother feels vacancy through her whole body—as if all that’s left of her is an open window.

The space tears her ribs out one by one. Her bones becoming corridors. She leaves lamps on in his room—the familiar sight of light from the hall comforts her night time walks—warm & glowing. She remembers his shadow cradling a black & white Rickenbacker—soft clamoring metallic songs. She lays down on his blue bed covers—inhales deep—clutches the comforter as if it were her son—the smell blue hair gel & Irish Spring soap still lingering in the fabric.

Getting up, she makes his bed again—smoothing out the wrinkles in the pillow case. She remembers the house in Malvern—hardwood floors & Dad bounding down the stairs in the morning—scrapple crackling in the cast iron pan.

She fantasizes about making waffles & eggs again—a Sunday brunch for everyone—both her boys on either side of the small wooden table—glasses of OJ & jelly-toast.

Everyone is asleep.

He left his baseball cards on the desk—paging through them she doses off—

It’s rare that you get a photograph of a “goodbye”.

I’m wearing a galaxy print dress. My hair is dyed: fresh cobalt blue from the night before. The blue haired girl. My lipstick’s smeared from hauling hampers, Nirvana posters, Dad’s yellow spine books, & Pokémon pillows up three flights of stairs to my dorm: Wilkinson 308. Narrow halls & speckled carpet—My door dec is a great big balloon from the movie “Up”.

I crooked-tooth smile. Mom isn’t in the picture—Mom’s holding her iPhone—Joey tugging at the hem of her dress red sundress. She doesn’t have to tell us to get closer this time. Dad’s wearing a white shirt—sweat stained & stuck to his back.

Dad only hugs me when I’m leaving.

“I’ll be back.”

The process of getting older: a series of prolonged hugs—each both too short & too long.

Priscilla thinks she hears him playing guitar. Bolts down the squeaky stairs to the cold stone basement. Down there, Dad had spray-painted his name. GOW. An anti-signature carved into her clavicle. She runs her fingers across the scar tissue—

Love is so often etched into our flesh—raised skin—healed over—

She writes him poems. Crumples & tosses each stanza in the waste basket. She knows that he had to leave—

She knows love has a lot to do with how you leave.

Making his bed each morning, organizing his Kurt Vonnegut books on the shelf: alphabetical order, scooping up his beer bottle caps from coffee tables—a birthday card for every year he grew & she wasn't there to light his birthday candles—

She's been trying to make up for how she left him.

Sunday Dad comes back for dinner. His voice aches in her—laughter shaking every door hinge.

Priscilla opens her mouth to say hello. She is heard only as a creak of the foundation—shrug of the pipes.

I drop cheerio on the ragged dorm room carpet—it rolls beneath my hard wooden chair. My dog Piper will soon meander over & gobble it up. My black leggings still have dog hair on them.

I sit in windowsills & think about calling Mom. I change her name in my phone from “Mommy” or “Mom” in case someone else sees her texts flicker across my screen.

My room feels like a body I'm not ready for. I try not to spend too long at my desk. Mosquitos come in the open window.

My roommate listens to Brad Paisley while she puts on her pink eye-shadow.

I keep a rainbow flag folded in the top dresser drawer.

I read Hunter S. Thompson's *Better Than Sex* before bed & smile when his ramblings sound like Dad. He sits there in the wooden rocking chair—clutching a brown bottle & spouting off about Nixon again.

I don't call mom—I sit folded on the stone windowsill.

What's worse is that her goodbyes come & go.

There is no such things as one goodbye. A goodbye is an echo at best.

March 1989, the world is starting to open again & she feels ready to start something new.

She'll build a nest out of pear stems—she'll learn to crochet—maybe she'll finally take to saying the rosary with Mary.

& rain bring him home—closes the blinds.

Rain water-colors mosaics on the carpet—collage of light.

Rain make the house smell like him. She cries in the basement—pipes shrug—house wind moans all night.

She keeps his phone number on the back of a napkin even though she can't call him.

Christmas break makes me feel naked. My room at my parent's house: living in an apology.

I know I can't come back. I know I don't want to sleep there.

Sometimes alone with the white fan humming I pretend I'm in a hotel room. I pretend I'm traveling. I pretend the lights scrawling themselves down the highway

outside my house are city lights. I pretend I'm a New York girl: this room is only temporary—this skin is made of plaster.

I borrow Mom's blue station wagon. I wait in parking lots sometimes. I imagine sleeping there in the backseat—a vagabond—a drifter.

She's learned after all these years that a goodbye can never be said. A goodbye lives in your uninhabited spaces. An empty bookshelf she begins to fill—*goodbye goodbye goodbye my love*—

It's October when Rich decides to go to Ireland. He doesn't tell Mary or Flo or Joan. He just leaves.

Priscilla wishes he was going forever—that she could get his absence over with. He comes back with fudge from the airport. Mary slices the chocolate into thin slices & eats them standing up at the kitchen counter.

Rich munches rainbow M & M Keebler cookies from the couch. The Phillies are down by nine.

Priscilla unfolds more of his discarded drawings. She takes them to the basement & hangs them up. She knows she shouldn't but the fast strokes of his pencil remind her how well she'll always know his hands.

Dad sleeps in my bunk bed. The mattress is sunken in.

He paints the doors of my closet with a big pug dog face. I don't use the closet. I put my old clothing in trash bags.

I feel like I'm dying. I'm selfish: I don't like to give away old dresses & skirts. It feels like too much of a goodbye.

There's one yellow dress with frilly white straps that I know will never wear. I don't put it on. I keep the dress in the top shelf of my desk the next year of college. There—folded—she dances—homing coming 2010—a bouquet of roses—long blonde hair & haphazardly red lips—she laughs & hugs herself—for the night her body is her own.

She tells me when I visit the Aunts “you're getting so big—so big.”

I want to say, “I feel like I'm getting smaller. I don't trust my bed rooms. I feel like a windowsill.”

She still has all of her son's drawings taped the walls of the basement. She hears Dad singing four-chord rock songs—hears him muttering an ‘Our Father’ at night. Her goodbyes are active—her goodbyes are in the present—she's still in the process of making them.

I tell her, “I'm sorry.”

Dad hugs me in the driveway outside the open door of my rusty green Volvo.

His hugs are wadded up words he doesn't say like "I love you" & "I miss you" & "I wish you wouldn't grow up so fast."

He says, "Ohhh."

I say "I'm sorry."

He tells me, "Don't be sorry."

I say, "I love you."

He says, "Come back."



Noble Street

Laugh wallpaper
let's fill living room with flower vases—
plant a spearmint bush—
kiss every shingle into place—
there's so much space to spread out here—

Can you imagine me? A grandmother?
What would I do, Bill?
Do you think I would wear an apron
like Mother?
It's not quite my style
but oh I'd like to try one on—

let's start by getting
the floors re-done—so they're
so creaky—cold kitchen floor—
this place feels so hungry, Bill—

Hungry for bare foot July &
socks on Christmas morning—

I know that's not what this
House will be—not for us at least

It's a match-box—
Bring home firewood—
crawl up chimney—we'll
be smoke—

A garden—we'll plant a garden
Raise chickens—fix the old red
coop—crack each morning sun
an egg yolk iron skillet sizzling—

We'll make our children breakfast
& pretend it's Sunday—

oh look at her
A grand daughter—did you ever
think you would know a grand daughter?

What do you think of her hands?

How her curiosity leaving nothing
untouched?

What do they feel like?
Hold them for me—

Doesn't she remind you of Billy?

You know one afternoon (before
I met you) I made her up—I cut
her hair short—gave her dirty knees
& grass stain legs—

I said she would scoop earth—
dance in driveways to bring rain—
maker of mud—

she would write
in notebook margins—
stand on tip-toes
to reach for boxes top
your refrigerator—

I'm coming home now—I'm making
A home—me a grandmother—
a mother
 maybe —your wife—

We'll take the door frames
from Malvern—
save the blue chair
in the living room—

You don't have to tell them
Its mine—oh but talk to me—
talk to me like you used to—
say my name—
Priscilla

When cicadas play
porch lit mouth harps—
When moths bang their
heads on window pane—

reburying my great uncle in the attic

did we find your mass grave in the Philippines
or some hillside in Thailand?

a pixelated white cross

Mom pointing & saying
I found him—I found him

your brother died before we would tell him where
your body is—

we looked at this garden of white crosses grown
in a photograph on the boxy computer screen—

five years old I first thought
about visiting you with a handful of chrysanthemums—

I knew you only from your triangle-folded
american flag on bottom shelf of the bookcase in the attic—

I liked to caress the course
surface—permanent creases—

pluck out your purple heart & pin it on
the chest my stuffed elephant

that indigo mouth—

a bruise from god—the kind of goodbye
letter that sits heavy in the bottom of an envelope—

when my grandfather returned from world war II
his family had moved—

he walked up to his door step to find a different home
had grown there—

pondered if all this time he himself had
turned into a ghost—

he briefly recalled teaching his
brother, you, to kick the coal off the top of the freight cars
down by the railroad tracks to heat the house when cold snapped
in november—

he wondered who was taller now as he walked, ponderous down
a back street in south philadelphia—

we buried my grandfather in the attic—

jar of ashes— he mumbles
about the war the GREAT war
in the cracked knuckles
of our house--heat rattles
through bones—

my brother rests an encyclopedia
of military weapons in his lap—

i'm eating a slice of my mother's banana
bread from the counter—

we invited my grandfather inside
but he walked away—

he didn't want to go home without a brother--
so i'm here—

standing at a white cross in
Thailand or the Philippines
or maybe your real bones are still sinking
into the dirt of Okinawa where

we presume you were shot
or bombed or set on fire—

i stand there & think of something
to ask you about but all i know about you is in
the corners of a folded
american flag & a royal purple heart beat—

I ask you if you
eat banana bread or if your mother
forgets to water the herb bushes
she keeps on the porch—

I sit down in the grass
I packed us sandwiches—

I figured you would eat something
like tuna salad--

I wanted to ask
you if there was something you
left out of the letters-- if there
was ever something you wanted to
tell your brother that you thought about
still—I'll ask you to come along—
to come home &
you won't want to leave

I knew about the family curse of coming
home to a different house—

to find your name has a new address—

this one is perched on a hill
outside a town called Kutztown that
you probably have never heard of—

I told you the house is painted green
& maroon & on warm nights
in the summer your brother will
sit outside in a neon blue lawn chair

I brought a jar for you to
bury yourself in-- we're going
to the attic where unfinished
letters are written—

I uproot the white cross--
fill my pockets with
the remnants of your bones
on a hill in Okinawa-- mixed with
bullet shells & singed grass—

my brother turns the page to his
book on military weapons—

I dangle my feet from the bar stool
at the counter &
we listen to you & my grandfather,
your brother
unearth your body's ashes
in the attic—
purple purple
heart beat

How to fold a slice of pizza

Saw-dusty floor—Mamma’s Delight pizza box open in front of us. We ate off thin napkins. I blotted the grease from the top of my slice before peeling off the cheese.

We were sitting in what would become my bed room of our new house on Noble Street.

“I don’t want doors on my closet,” I said.

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to be scared of what could be hiding behind it.”

He scooted closer to me & plucked the pizza slice from my hand. I had removed the cheese & was just eating slimy tomato sauce bread.

“What have you done?”

“I can never figure out how to eat it right.”

He put the cheese back inside & creased the slice. I thought the pizza looked like a paper airplane folded like that.

“You gotta fold it.”

I followed his instructions even though I secretly thought my deconstructed way was better. Folding the pizza took was too clean for me.

Dad stood up & wiped his hands on his painter pants. Dad sauntered around the room—surveying the barebone walls of the house around us.

When Pop-pop died he left us his skeleton. His house on Noble Street. It’s arthritic walls—Foundation sinking into the hill—basement full of storm water. His skeleton would become our project for the better half of my childhood.

“Pop-pop died in this room,” Dad said—staring at the would-be closet. “He drank whiskey the night before. That’s the way to go. I hope I die like that.”

Dad got out the paint rollers & trays.

“Why are we painting it white? I thought you were going to make it into a rainforest?”

“We’re just doing primer tonight—you have to primer before you can paint any fun colors.”

I eagerly swiped the roller from him. “So tonight we do white and tomorrow we paint it for real.”

Dad poured a can of primer into the tray. I plopped the whole roller in the tray—sending a glob of paint onto Dad’s threadbare Chuck Taylors.

“Oops.”

Dad glared. “Now are you going to listen or should I have left you home with Mommy?”

“I’m listening. I’m going to help.”

Dad sighed & showed me how to dip the roller in even so that it wouldn’t drip. He painted a stripe across the wall.

“Listen, Sarah, you need at least a few coats of primer.”

“How many can we do tonight?” I asked—painting my first stripe next to Dad’s.

“This one has to dry first.”

I tried to keep up with him—dipping my roller right after him. Dad told me a story about Ike from college who did karate like I did. He said Ike’s daughter got to fight with the boys she was so good.

“I want to fight with the boys when we have the first competition next month.”

“We can see.”

“I know I can.”

“Pop-pop thought you had spunk. Do you remember playing in the backyard. Oh you were feisty.”

“I was?”

“Oh yeah—he loved that he had a granddaughter like you. He would have loved to see your karate belt tests.”

“I bet he wouldn’t think I could break a board!” I said, chopping the air with the roller & splattering the wall more.

“Will you watch it?”

“Sorry.”

The first hour or so of rolling was great but the novelty wore off around the time we finished the first wall.

We kept going.

The sun turned red & sunk in the window.

Dad turned on the work light so we could finish.

I had white primer all over my jeans—caked on my knees & knuckles. There were flecks of it my hair.

“I wish I got to know Pop-pop.”

She laughed like pink rose bouquet

My love slipped on her white nurse shoes
Priscilla with her white nurse shoes
 Cheeks dabbed with red rouge
Oh, my wife wore her white nurse shoes

She laughed like a pink rose bouquet
My love, she laughed—a rose bouquet
 I begged her to stay
Her laugh—like a bright rose bouquet

The doctors are supposed to be wrong
Her doctors are supposed to be wrong
 Said we didn't have long
Oh, her doctors were supposed to be wrong

The doctors are supposed to be wrong
I told her, doctors going to be wrong
 I said she was strong
Oh, I lied and now my wife is gone

Our Father who art in green gown heaven
Our Mother who art too loud to beckon
 blood full of venom
Oh, Mother you took her up to heaven

Humpback Whale Braces for the Torpedo

Your metal bodies—
Your thunderous children—
Oh, I have been watching—

World of blue drum—
I came here to remember you—
My voice long ago
echoing—beat across sand—

Drift sunken ship—
Drift in me—

What have you
done to earn a body
of silver?

Cut through us—

Oh humans—yes
humans—
with your love of
all things sharp—

What do you know
of ocean?

Of wave—
Of crashing—

Broken bottle lovers—

We beach ourselves—

Oh is your God
A humpback whale?

You cannot
ignore the immensity
of this body—

your violent love—
your fruit flesh—

salt clean wounds—

death—
as quite & accidental
as wave break

sometimes i run away to with my grandmother

for real this time—
not just to the sparse grass behind the garage—

no backpack full of ritz crackers & meek winter apples like when i was
ten & determined to make it on my own—

i've got baby carrots & raspberries & those should last us
at least till we get to new jersey—

you can borrow my dresses—
we don't know where yours are but
somebody somewhere probably has them in the back of
a closet—it's a shame i know—

when i was a girl i used to ask the aunts to find them
& they told me they were all gone years ago—

do you like this orange one?
i wore it the first time i read one of my poems aloud

did you ever read your poems aloud?
i'd like to hear that—i really would—

where are we going? oh, yes, we used to go
there on vacation when i was little—
when i was pink & sunburned-cheeked

chincoteague is a beautiful kind of scar—reddish dipping into sun—
an aching island—

i'll probably cry when we get there—don't worry
it'd probably be the good kind of crying—

i think my favorite part when i was younger
was packing a suitcase—the blue old-fashioned one
that dad tells me used to be yours—

i would use a whole half of it for
stuffed animals—beanie babies—the softest: a kiwi bird
named kurt—no i don't have him now he's probably
in the attic—

you could take a book with you—it'll be a long trip—
i'm taking a book too but more as a comfort—
i know i'll be too distracted to read—

would you read to me before bed?
did you ever do that for dad?
he used to for me—that's
why i like books now it think—

yes, i know it's winter—

no, i've never seen the beach with snow—i imagine it'll be quiet

sand & frost mixing into ocean—

on my iPhone i sometimes check the weather in Chincoteague—feel the thunder—the
melting ice—the winds from the bay—today it's 50 degrees there & 42 degrees here
which really isn't so different right?

8 degrees away

i want to take you there because after dinner at Bill's Seafood mom & i walked on the
beach barefoot together—

i ran ahead & drew monsters in the wet sand with a jagged piece of shell—i don't
remember if either of us said anything

i think of that place now when i don't know what to say to her—

i talk a lot—my tongue like the canal bridge connecting chincotague to the mainland—

i talk as if words could ever fill in all the gaps—all the distance—this poem is a collection
of foot steps towards an island we'll never really be on together—

hold still—let this poem press our feet in the snow/sand—

when i was in high school i used to save money & think about renting a hotel room up
the street just to live somewhere else for a night—

there this is bed & breakfast on main with a fountain outside—
ivy creeping across brick face—

we could stay there
& leave in the morning—

the ocean is cold & patient

Purgatory

Mom described purgatory as sitting on the porch in the cold October rain & looking inside at everyone—not being able to come inside yet—warm light—bowl of dinner rolls on the table—Billy saying grace—

I was more scared of purgatory than hell—

Hell is comic book of flames—

how could a body understand that kind of fire?

like Saint Lucy—kindling the furnace—eyes rolling on her gold plate—

i was a match-stick dabbling girl—i'd caught the ends of my hair on fire—i'd made my own penance from handfuls of stones near the quarry—i'd murdered colonies of ants to watch the mulch move like black water—

hell was a temptation—

Mom said that in purgatory god gets your soul ready—

i didn't like the idea of having to memorize the spelling of words & repeating the 'Our Father' until the sentences came out like static— i was emptying prayers of their meaning—

repeating them into the dark of my room—nightlight summoning—

i'm certain that's where i'll go—

purgatory makes sense to me & i'll probably meet you there—

There'll be a black board & a desk to keep all our belongings in

they'll give us those lousy wooden pencils that have to be sharpened— haunted by black Pilot G-2 07 pens gliding across lined paper—

what do you teach a soul?

will they let us talk to each other?

stay up late—sneak back to earth to haunt whoever we know is left—you will probably be more mischievous than me—having been in purgatory longer—

the aunts pray for everyone to go to heaven

they've been praying for you so long that sometimes they forget your name they call you "sister" instead of "Priscilla"

martyring you in their mouths—

they write us post cards—ones with unspecific mountains
& rainbow umbrellas by the ocean

sadly there's no way to mail a 'thank you' back to earth—

we might skip lessons sometimes—
tightrope walk on the crease between the living & the dead—

you would tell me stories about first kisses & i would tell you stories about how i figured
out i was a boy—

i'd want you to ask more questions—

no one gives you that kind of space to think here—

what color will our souls be?

i hope mine is indigo—you strike me as a deep—almost gold—yellow—

with company, i could get used to the rain

A New House on Farragut Street

Pop-Pop came back from the war through 30th street station.

All trains lead back to Philadelphia. I can see him—young & stocky. In old photographs he looks like a young boxer dog. He came back from war as a boy. He was twenty or twenty-one—a backpack on his shoulder—train station whirling around him.

Images reverberating since he left—time cut like a film reel & playing & playing—projector noise rattled & clicked behind his ears—replaying visions of a hot nights in Brazil—cigar smoke—the braying of horses at a nearby stable—the clink of silverware at dinner—Harold & Michael next to him—talking with their mouths full of mashed potatoes and beef stew—

the apparition of a woman who said her name was Ana—her body like a soup ladel against his & he felt like the world could end in one humid night—the trees whispering in Portuguese a language he could at best order food or cigars in—

Você ficará? Você ficará quando a guerra acabar?

Will you stay? Will you stay when the war is over?

*Of course—of course—*Is what all men would say when the night is hot & they want to be men but they're really boys—

he was as old as me on a hot night with the trees singing songs he didn't understand & a woman named Ana translating & laughing at him for his boyhood & his soft body & his English—

He blinked & the station bustled like a market in town up the roads from where they were stationed—there were bulbous green fruits & colorful women smiling & so much tobacco smoke—

He spent a good hour sitting there & letting the memories play through until he finally got up & decided to find home again—

home with his mother & the cold kitchen floor & he could smell that soup she made with canned tomatoes & leeks & the white bowls with the green rims—

His face got hot & he touched the back of his hand to his forehead—he felt the room lilt for a moment & he steadied himself on the bench—looking around at the bobbing faces—faces in the water—water of the ocean—the bow of a ship bobbing—the sounds of water & metal cutting open the soft face of the coast—

He stood up too quickly—felt his face—fiery as the bow of the ship & the officer stood over him again & his brows furrowed in disgust—a deep kind of disgust that he couldn't erase—

If Pop-Pop's story of punching an officer is true then he probably sat there thinking of how to tell it—how it could not seem so bad—how it could be okay that he was *dishonorably* discharged & not sent home with the kind of glory boys are supposed to bring home & lay on the dining room table—

"I was so dizzy," he muttered to himself & rung his hands. He thought how he could never tell Freddy that—that Freddy would ride him the rest of his life if he told him that after he had been to Okinawa— He couldn't tell Freddy he was discharged—there would be other stories—he would make other stories—

He didn't want to think of his brother with a gun.

He knew he would be home before his brother—but the war had to end soon. It had to.

Japan would go with the rest of Europe. He would wait & he would see Freddy & maybe he would find a way to tell the story without sounding like a coward—

He mistook the lights in the station for the sun & finally packed himself up to go home by the afternoon.

American air was wrong & his skin was somehow wrong now too—he wanted to take off his uniform but it was the only clothing he took back with him—he felt like it was wrong to be wearing it—like it wasn't even his body—

When Uncle Rich tells the story, Pop-Pop walks around the city a week or possibly just a few days after arriving at his home on Canal street & discovering that the family there was not his own.

He approached the house—the film reel still spinning & his mouth making shapes not words & making un-kept promises—

He knocked & a young couple opened the front door—her polka dot dress blooming in the doorframe & his furrowed brow burning at Pop-Pop

Who the hell are you?

We... live here...

The Gows—the Gows—where did they move?

Oh... Oh they're in the city—somewhere—I'm sorry—

Pop-Pop stormed away—he was hungry & had expected his mother to open the door.

He stood there on the sidewalk—taking inventory of the house—looking at what used to be his & Freddy's window—

He shifted his weight side-to-side. Thin-souled shoes.

That night he ate at the terminal market & slept on a bench back at the station.

The first night it was frustrating—he barely slept & he would wake up to the softness of Ana kissing his neck & then wake up again to the brisk station—a guard letting him by because of his uniform—

“On your way home son?” the officer asked.

Pop-Pop nodded.

By the second night homelessness was a liberation—a break from reality—he imagined a new life in which he was a drifter—he would ramble from city to city with just his bag. There was still a can of beans inside it & he ate that the next morning & gave enthusiastic hellos to the station goers on their way to a thousand rails that do somehow all lead back to Philadelphia—

By the end of the week he was out of food & out of imagination & it was Sunday & he knew where he had to go—

Pop-Pop was Greek Orthodox which is interesting because of HOW Catholic his future wife would be. I've never been to a Greek Orthodox church but I think someday I'd like to—there's one up the street from Saint Mary's in Kutztown. He knew his parents would be there on Sunday morning at Saint George's on South 8th Street.

He came in late—lingering in the back—moved his lips clumsily to the Our Father—watching the backs of his mother & father's heads with a growing sense of fear.

He resolved near the end of the service to wait till next week—that he could do another we of roaming but instead his mother glanced back for some reason or another—maybe the statue at the back of the church—whatever it was she glared at him & then smiled a lop-sided kind of smile & looked forward without telling her husband she'd seen him.

They came to greet him at the end of the service & he decided not to try to tell them anything about the war just yet—they didn't ask much—they didn't touch him.

They drove home to a house on Farragut street where he had never been before & he set his backpack by the door & the house smelled hollow & cold & stale—like the whole thing was tipping.

His parents dispersed to their usual duties—his mother with a stew that smelled alien to him & he felt as if he wanted to go back to sleeping on the bench at the station.

It wasn't till they went to bed that he saw it—a folded American flag—a triangle on the mantel.

I can't imagine they would have told him.

It's the story of the two brothers off at war & only one comes back—the story of a purple heart bruise that never heals—

the story of a new house on Farragut street—



Who lives in my father's house?

blue mail box & wood floors

they take down the christmas tree on the 14th of janaury
when it seems sensible to let the holidays drop
their needles—

voracious vacuum—

tea pot cat-call—

ballet-shoe stairwell

she takes dance lessons & her brother
tracks mud in the house when it rains
too early in march—

in june when the house remembers dad's
soft bare feet & uncle rich's elbows—

a television praying for
saturday morning

for the ghost of a red sofa
for the lamp who's light haunts
the living room corner

family dinner on sundays temps his spirits—

dad in his football pajamas
in his altar boy robes
in his tie & navy blue button-up
in bath tub skin & green winter blankets

what role does the house itself take in this?

do the wood beams cling to their bodies—
replaying them like film reels in
the night when this new family is all asleep?

they have a golden retriever who barks
aimlessly at dad—he crawls
up the stairs on all fours

his parents' bedroom—painted lavender

new photographs on the dresser—

whose wedding is this?
whose pink baby shower?

i wish i could visit all the houses we have lived—

Franklin street & main—

Macungie & Farragut & Canal—

how many addresses does our body have?

Too Old

We started decorating for Halloween as early as September. Dad would drive me to go out & hit up Party City—Joan Anne Fabrics—Home Goods—Walmart—anywhere we could find new decorations. Dad has been haunting houses since he moved in with the Aunts so he's had time to cultivate his skills.

Mom was never a big fan of Halloween, she'd say, "Bill did you have to?" whenever we came home with new decorations. She especially didn't like when Dad blared "scary noise" CDs from his sound system in the basement—whole house reverberating with creaking doors, ghouls wailing, & witches cackling. I'd close my eyes & see the house contort—grow crooked stairs cases & spider webs.

The process of haunting our house smelled of plastic & pizza lunch from Mama's Delight up the street. Dad & I decorated while Billy shielded his eyes & nibbled on kettle cooked chips we always ordered with our pizza. Billy wasn't interested in Halloween—he was easily scared. He wouldn't go into the living room alone once the decorations were up.

There was a skull that sang "The Monster Mash" when you passed by it—eye blinking & jerky robotic movements twitching the jaw—fake spider webs draped like garland around the windows & on the porch.

My personal specialty was picking out rubber rats & naming them. Cheddar was a fat squat little rodent with bulging red eyes. I carried him around with me to add to my creepy aesthetic. When we were done getting decorations we would get dinner at the airport diner.

Cheddar sitting next to me, I ordered the same thing as Dad. Double decker turkey club sandwiches. I liked them best for the little blue tasseled tooth-picks holding them together.

"What do you want to be this year?"

I chewed slowly, washing down the sandwich with a gulp of sprite. "The grim reaper." It was mostly just so I could have the cloak.

"You should dress up too," I add.

"I'm too old for that."

Billy came into the rec room with three shopping bags full of plastic fake paintings, spider webs, individually wrapped candy, & some fake gushy eyeballs. Under his arm was a plastic light-up pumpkin.

"Oh my my what is this?" Mary asked—looking up from the television. She was still in her scrubs from work. She munched on a handful of pretzels.

"Halloween."

"You have a week," she said.

"Not if I'm going to be ready."

Mary looked alarmed. "For what?"

"Oh, we're going to haunt the living room," he said.

She went back to looking at the TV. She paused & called after him "You're going to what?"

"It's okay I asked grandmom!" he shouted back.

He laid out his findings across the white carpet of the living room. The noise of the clock ticking in the back ground was the only noise there. He surveyed the organ in the corner—excitedly.

Rich can in to watch his brother. “What are you doing with all this?” Rich asked.

“I’m opening up a haunted house,” Billy said.

“Are you going to charge money?” Rich asked.

Billy paused a second & thought about it. “Nah, this is for trick-or-treaters,” he answered.

“You’re not going to go with me?” Rich asked.

Squishing an eye ball in his hand he said, “I think I’m too old for it.”

“You’re ten.”

“Ten year olds are too old for it.”

“Am I too old for it?” Rich asked. “Wait Jack is going—he’s not too old for it. I think Mike & Sam are too. There’s plenty of elven year olds going.”

“They just want candy—it’s different.”

The year before they had gone up & down the streets of Malvern. Billy was a mobster & Rich was a ghost. Pop-pop held the big metal flash light & Priscilla carried their baskets when they got tired of holding them. When they were done they laid out all their candy on the kitchen table & Pop-pop stole a few chocolate bars from each.

Priscilla admonished him for being greedy. She laughed & took a Twizzler for herself.

“I think I just don’t feel like it anymore. I’m still making a costume—it’ll be scary though!”

“Oh... how scary?”

“I’m saving up and I’m getting that rubber mask at the party store.”

“Oh, rubber masks creep me out... I don’t like them. Don’t use it on me,” Rich said, leaving the room.

After a few hours of work the room was thoroughly haunted. Billy sat at the organ & flicked on the red switch. He turned up the volume all the way & slammed his hands down to send a dissonant note clamoring through the house.

Grandmother came downstairs to stairs & stood in the living room a few minutes before getting her voice heard over Billy’s furious “playing” (if you could call it that).

“Billy?”

He turned around—ominously. “What?”

“Turn it down.”

“Okay... can it be loud on Halloween?”

She paused & sighed. “Yes—but you better buy me some earmuffs—you’re going to wake the dead. Her eye caught a picture on the coffee table of Billy & Rich on either side of Priscilla.

In his room, Billy tied his black cape. He looked at his reflection in the window—hiding his face behind the cape like a vampire. He wasn’t a vampire. He was some type of ghoul—that’s what the mask said on the tag “Ghoul”. He picked up the ketchup from his desk & squirted some in his hand—smearing it on the masks mouth. It almost looked like blood. He snarled.

Rich knocked timidly on the door.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“Are you ready—there’s already some trick or treaters.”

“It’s like six?”

Billy opened the door & Rich jumped back. Rich was dressed as a pumpkin. He was just wearing orange & a green baseball cap.

“What the hell are you?” Billy asked.

“A pumpkin.”

“That’s so lame—you can’t help me haunt the living room—you just answer the door.”

“I was hoping maybe we could get away for a little bit and visit a few houses... just like up this side of the street.”

“Maybe,” Billy said.

He was fully immersed in his persona. As he walked down the stair he turned off all the lights in the house as he went—he was making his way to the organ.

“You’re not going to scare those kids are you?” Rich asked.

“Not too much—just a warm up.”

Rich went to the door to usher the Martin girls into the dark living room. One was Snow White & the other the Tooth Fairy. Billy had sat the bowl of candy at the center—a great orange bowl brimming with full-sized Hershey bars, chocolate eyeballs, tootsie rolls, and loose skittles.

A Halloween record of ambient music meandered lightly in the background.

“I don’t like it,” one of the girls said to her mother who was walking behind her.

“Oh it’s all pretend,” her mother said—a bit taken back herself.

The group didn’t notice a dark figure hunched over at the organ playing so softly that it mixed in with the sounds of the record.

As the children got closer Billy slowly turned up the volume until he slammed on the dissonant chord as he had practiced & whirled around to growl at the kids.

The girls shrieked & one ran out the front door. Their mother gasped & dropped a pumpkin basket on the living room floor.

Billy pulled up the mask. “Happy Halloween!” he shouted.

The girls returned to get candy—hesitantly staring at Billy in the bloody mask. He perched in the corner on the piano stool.

On the way, out Mrs. Martin made sure the Connors knew she didn’t approve of the ghoulishness of haunted living room.

“I don’t see a problem—he’s just being a boy,” said Mother.

“I know... I know the boy has some hard things. We’re praying for you all. Especially Billy and Rich.”

In the other room the next round of trick or treaters entered & the organ music started soft—swelling—blaring through the house.

WHAT'S SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN

the doors
dropped off their hinges
it's just me here her hands
 on the banister
 this morning
tonight
her white work shoes her plaid armchair

a ceiling tile—
 An unmade bed &
WHAT'S SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN
supposed to what's supposed to
she's supposed
 to watch

The boys
after school— become men

pick her up i pick her up
From her shift on Thursday
 wears her white work shoes
She'll ask to drive sometimes & I'll say
"No" sometimes & "Yes" not enough

Tomorrow she'd cook
Steak & stewed tomatoes &
Maybe scalloped potatoes
Butter rolls in the basket

next month
Richard has his confirmation & she'll fix bunch after
& Billy plays baseball & she'll toss his pants
 at the washer
share a blanket at the ballfield

& on Sunday she said she wanted
 wanted
 to take a walk
 up the street

 as a family
& I want to tell her I'm sorry I wasn't there
when she went she went
she went for a walk
 I didn't know
I don't want to see
the boys they look like her

I don't know what you say
say I'm so sorry for us
 anyone told them
 should ever tell them

I'll tell the boys say she ran
away—took the Manayunk/Norristown line
& from there at 30th street took the line
to New York

 escaped to somewhere
 we've never been
 white shoes in hand
 purse full of pinwheel mints

 No one teaches you how to
 miss someone—

run away that's what I would tell them
tell them she had to run away
 That we didn't do anything wrong

It's me It's me
 who didn't deserve her

if I wait here long enough she'll come
down the stairs in the navy blue dress
 black heels

she'll laugh & say
"Did I give you a scare?"
 she'll hang herself around my
neck—
 kiss me like a pocket watch like a door hinge

oh Pris if you saw me

So Beautiful

As Aunt Joan got worse the cousins stopped coming around. Her brother didn't visit. Not the people in church—it was all just her sisters and us.

There is a lot of things I don't like about us Gows but my family are not fair-weather lovers. We don't leave when things are hard. I think one of the most admirable things about Mom & Dad & Uncle Rich is that they show their love by showing up for you—for each other.

We went up nearly every weekend those few years while Aunt Joan slowly forgot us—not one by one but in waves.

“You look—you look so beautiful,” she said—brushing the back of her hand against my cheek. She had such soft skin. We don't think a lot about the bodies of our family members—their skin—the contours of their faces. She liked to touch you—I think it was how she knew she was safe with you.

Aunt Joan took both my hands in hers & shook them standing there. She swung my arms back & forth as if we were children.

I often wonder who she imagined I was when she used to see me in the later years. She didn't know nieces or nephews or children or mothers—she knew bodies & faces.

*

She didn't talk as much as she used to. She got up to go to the bathroom while we were all at the dining room table—a polka dot table cloth draped to celebrate someone's birthday—probably Rich & Dad's.

There was fried chicken & potato salad & coleslaw & of course little ice cream sundae cups to go with the sheet cake from Giant. Aunt Joan didn't eat much. She loved sweets.

“They said it could have been just an isolated episode,” Flo said—looking over her shoulder to see where Joan was. “They said it might have been just a stroke but they have to do more tests to see for sure.”

“She's been fine now,” Mary said.

Joan returned to a nearly silent table.

*

“She can still drive—just maybe leave a sticky note on the wheel or take a grandchild with her is what the doctor said,” Mary explained.

Joan came in the living room—a plate of M & M cookies—one dangling from her mouth. She wiped the crumbs off on her sleeve.

*

We were all on the beach of Assateague Island. Joan was walking towards the ocean. She sat down & started crying.

I walked up next to her first. Us & the Aunts had got a house in Chingoteague together—the Aunts all loved it there. It was quiet & the ocean wrapped around you from all sides.

“Are you okay?” I asked. I was eleven & chubby. I was wearing my hair in pig tails. My freckles were proud chocolate chips. I had a one-piece bathing suit that was blue. The sand was caked up my thighs.

She just kept crying & shaking her head.

Later in the living room that night Mary said in her quiet thinking voice, “She didn’t know where she was.”

“Does she know now?” Mom asked.

*

In the back seat of the car on the way to Bill’s Seafood Joan tugged at the hem of my dress. It was a white dress that made me feel naked—it stuck to my body in a way clothing hadn’t done before. It made me feel scared & Mom told me I looked so old. I was going into middle school the coming fall.

“You are so beautiful. You are so beautiful,” Joan kept saying.

I smiled & nodded as she smiled & nodded. We bobbed together like buoys in the channel.

“Where are you going to school?” she asked.

I said, “Kutztown.”

She nodded again & said, “You know you’re going to do great & you’re going to do so many things & you know not everyone gets that opportunity but you deserve it. Mary & Pris went & you’ll do great.”

She thought I was going to nursing school & I played along. I told her how excited I was.

“I’ll write to you,” I said.

& She looked so grateful.

*

When she used to watch Billy & I at the house in Fleetwood she always wore a little chain link fish necklace for me. She said it could take you to China.

She wore it & didn’t know what China was anymore. She knew I was beautiful & she reminded me I was beautiful as we sat on the couch. She ate pretzels & sometimes would fall asleep.

*

She cried in the living room & Mary & Flo say to ignore her.

She took Billy’s hand. He tells me later that he wanted to pull away but didn’t.

She looked at pictures on my phone. I showed her how to flick through them with the swipe of her fingers & she was mesmerized.

*

She was ten or twelve & the television was new & her sisters were her grandmothers & the house smelled like food—so much food & Daddy was always on his way home from work—

She was thirteen & her socks had stretched to the moon & her legs grown so wide—how would anyone ask her to formal? Mouthful of cookies—

She’s was at the Jersey Shore & where are Bill & Rich & her sister who is dying too soon & her sister is dead too soon & she learns about it again

& there is a girl in a white dress sitting with her & she is

So beautiful & she wants another word for all the things she feels about the girl but all her mouth keeps saying is “So-so-so-so beautiful.”

She forgets her mouth is full of food & it’s Christmas—it’s warm for Christmas—

She smiles because someone is holding her hand & he is so small & his hands are so plump—she feed him a cookie—

She’s five & she wants her mother but her mother is old & living inside a picture frame on the wall—she can’t get her to come out—

Her father is dead & she knows that—
She learns her sister has died

Again—

She eats breakfast for the fourth time—spoon fed by an old woman with thick rim glasses named Mary—

She Mary is a child of eight years old & tell her to put her shoes on for school—
& the sun is warmer than it should be—

& the Phillies have won the world series &

She's going to China—maybe next year without clothing under her covers & she turns on all the lights to remember her body—

& that girl is

so-so Beautiful

*

I haven't really worked out yet how to remember her dying. I know it felt like her death was a process of her being whittled away to nothing. The truth is she was always smiling. She was always not more or less my Aunt Joan. I don't want to make it sound like she was just a "happy person"—she was a complex one but she knew how to smile. She laughed—she cried. She got lost. She felt so so alone.

She didn't need to know who I was to know I was beautiful.



Things Remembered

Thanksgiving 2017:

Our attic is a jumbled mess of faded cardboard boxes spilling out onto the lush emerald carpet. I go up alone to find a board game. Our thanksgiving is quiet now: Mom, Dad, Billy, Joey, & Uncle Rich. Joey sits in his underwear at the table & we convince Mom to make everyone get up to serve themselves this year. She's upset because the stuffing was slightly burned.

I went up alone to find a board game but more because I just wanted to be alone. I drift through the husk of my old room—father's beer cans stacked like trophies on the book case—my old dresses in ghostly heaps in the corner—reds & yellows & pinks. My old clothing scares me—I feel guilty for leaving dresses behind—stockings still clinging to my thighs—

They call me by my birth name. For the third time, I drove down thinking that today would be the day—today would be the day I would tell them they have to call me “Robin.” That I'm not a girl. I won't & I know I won't. I want to be strong—I want to be one of those queers who comes out dramatic & radiant. My family isn't like that. We're a quiet kind of love, Dad offering to do my laundry, Mom remembering to get me vegan egg nog, Billy calling me on the ride home, Rich with his list of movie recommendations he saves on a note card to tell me when he sees me again each time, Joey asking to play Sonic on the Sega upstairs—he tells I can be Tails if I want even though he's Joey's favorite character.

So, I go to the attic & take inventory of myself. My black sweater. My chuck Taylors—same as my father's. Flour stains on my thighs from baking Black Forest cake.

A stack of photographs spills from a toppled card board box—I page through the images:

me standing between Dad & Mom—eyes shut—grinning teeth-bared & fierce with laughter. Mom has pig tails & Dad is wearing a shirt with no holes.

me blowing out cupcake candles—the torsos of relatives crowding me—gripping the wooden kitchen table—a denim jumper—

me dinosaur claws ready—wearing my Halloween green power-puff girl costume—roaring—

me bundled up in my grandfather's arms—I hug him tightly—small fingers—light golden hair—

Beneath the photographs is a worn blue box with the phrase “Things Remembered,” printed on it in red lettering. I remove the lid—carefully. I survey the room as if someone else would be watching me open it.

I'm writing about this because I haven't found a way to talk about it yet. I'm writing about this because I feel like I shouldn't have opened the box—like it wasn't mine to open.

The lid has a sticker that read “Bryn Mawr Hospital.” The box of things they gave to Dad & Uncle Rich when she died. On top: her nurse's badge “Priscilla Connor, RN.”

Hesitantly I pick the badge up & feel its plastic edges—run my finger over the pin—imagining her fumbling with the latch. More notecards—folded letters—a scratch pad with notes:

*Remember Aunt Jean
Pray for Michael*

Rich/Billy

Send Money to Evan

A journal—day by day. There she is, waking up in a hospital bed—there she is waiting for Dad & Rich to come visit—there is fading away—a candle lit each morning—wax dripping on the linoleum floor—did she know she was dying? How could you really know?

She keeps lists like me—to dos. She checks them off. The last entry has unchecked boxes that haunt me. She haunts me.

I'm writing this because I thought I was done writing about her.

Beneath her notebook are the letters.

She signs her letters “Pat” and sometimes “Patrick.”

In all the times I've been asking about my grandmother no one has ever mentioned that to me—why wouldn't they remember that? What made her like that name?

I'm writing this because I don't know my grandmother & you can't choose to stop writing about someone.

Next a letter from Rich—he says

“Dear mom, I miss you. Bill misses you. Donna and Michael miss you too. Get better soon.”

And there on the floor of my attic—stuffed animals strewn about & board game pieces across the carpet I cry. I cry because that kind of grief has spent these years asleep in the boxes of things to be remembered.

I'm writing this because I know now that remembering someone is a process never to be finished—how will she know that I miss her too.

Dad drew her a card with a big blue shark biting a doctor—it says

“Give the doctors a bite for me—get better—get better please.”

I know how she would have held the construction paper—delicately—a piece of art—would she have bared her teeth & growled with her son? Would she have told him how quickly it would end?

Prayer cards & a red rosary. A photograph of her in her wedding dress—same as the one I have in the top drawer of my desk—her cautious smile—holding a bouquet of grey scale flowers—do you remember what color they were?

I'm writing this so you can remember with me—I'm writing this because I don't want to tell Dad or Uncle Rich what I read—I don't know if they even know that the box is up there—inside so much of my grandmother has moved with us—Franklin to Main to Noble to attic where she sleeps—five feet from my grandfather's ashes on a shelf across the room.

I'm writing this because I hope to always find more of you.

Tell me a bed time story—

One about painting turtles red behind the ears—
About my body before i grew breasts
like mountains between us & my boy-hood

before the farmers sowed seeds in my wrists
that needed to be raked out—

hoe & nails—

Before the bouquets sexed me & did my nails blue for prom—

When we had cheeseburger teeth &
flicked the heads off dandelions—

those *other* girls

shooting your brother with the BB bullet—

You made me want a gun to
fire holes through the living room carpet

down into the basement where our
pet turtle plotted her escape—

red behind the ears—

what right did we have to land lock her?

what right did my skirts
have to fall above the knees—

baptized in creek mud—

tell me a story about Halloween—

open the windows so the shadows can listen—

the ghost of your mother
admonishing you for failing to procure
a daughter in all this mess—

it has been a long time since
there's been a girl out here—

the rocking chair time capsule—

if i were to sit there i would rock you
to sleep—

you soft organism—

oh, what could you have known
of bed time stories

the worlds he will tell you
are coming in the form of owl feathers
& haunted factories—

it's snowing now
& we wake up in a beer bottle—

don't let him escape out
the bedroom door

you're not quite asleep

Cut back the Ivy

In darkness we grow—our
children follow behind us & we listen—we listen
to their stories—their green stories

four sisters
in the front lawn
how they bent down for pears

& how their house moves &
attic walking ghosts watch
out windows—oh
we pass on stories

their boy cuts us back
each spring

after ice recedes
back into soil—

confirmation girls bit pears
dew washed bare feet

dresses—ruby & plaids &
they had socks pulled up to
their knees & their living room

spoke radio static—
each listened
to gravel-mouthed prophets
& they grew taller & moved away

came back on Sundays
filled air with laughter
brought fireplace wood
changed the flag on the porch

and their boys hung upside
down from thin maple tree
smelled everything sweet
in a pie tin

windows became mirrors
became front doors—became
alarm sound

foundation shaking with the movement
of her lips—these humans grew tall
wore scoop neck dresses—
danced to jazz—
found guitar strings to strangle

these humans
curled into themselves slowly—
stopped raking leaves
felt their knees crinkling—
they dried
like leaves—

sweep everyone
into the living room
& no one
dies—they just migrate

to living in windows—
it's time to cut us back—cut
us back boy with God scissors

cut us back & we'll
forehead kiss—
we'll remember
when your father didn't come home—

when the cars in the drive-way melted—

there are ghosts

there are ghosts-- & when he comes
back to trim us we will start from
the beginning & say to our children

there were four girls & a boy
& a mother who wiped
her hands on her apron & a father
who tumbled off a steam engine

Sunday night sat in the window
there was
a baby was never born who wrote
her name in the foggy window

the boy comes back to to trim the ivy—

Family tree

i planted each of my vertebrae
in hard december-bitten soil—
breathed mist—
melted earth—

what could my grandmother
really know of me?
what of my frayed cuticles
& coat hanger bones?

i've sewed myself again
& again— dirt smelling of her
rose petal perfume &
unlit evergreen candles—

if i keep planting will i find
some source of my queerness?
a cousin?
an unborn aunt?

no relics of my skeleton
take root & her yearning
fills up thimbles—
stitches snow drifts—

i think our family trees
are best seen in the winter—
bare anatomy
of repetition—

i found her letters in the attic
in a worn blue box—
her jaws pried
open like a coin purse—

metallic ping on the kitchen
floor—her lullabies are
dimes & pennies—
nickels for gum drops—

this was the hospital box
they used to send her home
when there was
no longer a body—

i step in—lay next to her
tell her i don't believe in family trees
or adam & eve
or apples or snakes—

she tells me there's better
weather for planting even
though she knows
i'm just impatient—

i try on her nurse's badge &
white apron—she reads me
get well cards
like poems—

these orchards

when i was 6 & 7 & 8 & maybe even 9/10, mom & i picked fruit for each season—metal mixing bowls of cherries—shoe boxes of blueberries & orange buckets of apples—all sorts of apples (i always wanted a variety) macintosh, golden delicious, granny smith (just for the novelty of tartness) & honey crisp to remind ourselves what it would taste like if we were quick enough to reach up & take a bite out of the sun—warm juice dripping down elbows—

i love to ponder the unanswerable nuances of my grandmother—if her forearms were ever sticky from a fist of nectarine or if there was an orchard nearby where her mother & her might pick apples—
did she lick her hands clean & wipe them on the front of her dress?

somewhere in the process of trying to remember her i stopped asking who she was & started asking who i needed her to be

did she slice apples into feathers or did she eat all the way through the core—seeds & all? I do that—i plant apple trees in my rib cage where they can't do any harm—their branches aching against my chest—

your family is not always what you need them to be

christmas this year mom put apples in my socking—i felt their weight before peering inside—winesap skinned—a dull scar-tissue red with hints of green—
i thought instantly of reaching for a ripe fruit in October—the sun setting on the side of the mountain as a breeze laughed through the orchard—

metaphors are often self-inflicted

“why do you write so much about the past like it was sad?” mom asks next to me on the sofa.
i don't really have an answer—

i know i sometimes remember us wrong
but i know we picked blueberries in shoe boxes because
the cardboard is still stained in the cupboard—

i know that sometimes i remember my grandmother wrong—
the type of resurrection i've made for her is meant to exist between us—i'm not interested in turning her photographs over again & again—tracing the archways in her eyebrows
& standing in their shadow—her body a cathedral for me to pray myself under—

all my life my aunts have only ever talked about my grandmother's death—
this is me planting us an orchard to pick fruit in—

this is me making family against their will

what did she think the sun tasted like?