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Samples: A Collection of Essays

by Caitlin Johnson

*April 17, 2015*

*Submitted in partial completion of the Master of Fine Arts Degree at Sarah Lawrence College May 2015*

For my family, Sophie, Annie, St. John's College Santa Fe—and all my loves.

*“I could give all to Time—except*

*What I myself have held.”*

*-Robert Frost*

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*Part 1: Landscapes*

## *Preface*

As a child, I would tap the rhythm of hoof beats on my desk at school, on my thighs, on the porcelain side of the bathtub—anywhere I laid my hands. If anticipated a jump and leaned forward too soon, or applied too little or too much pressure with my calves, I would break the rhythm of my horse's stride. So I practiced an unbroken rhythm, until it became a kind of prayer.

When I began riding, I felt there was no greater freedom than the freedom of being on horseback. The world fell away, and so did I. But every time I broke a rhythm, my trainer's voice shattered it. Unconsciously, I developed the habit of holding my breath as I rode. At the end of a course of jumps, I would be gasping or vomiting off the side of my horse. If I performed well, my trainer would pat my thigh approvingly and walk away. If I made a mistake, he would yell until strangers threatened to call child services. The beauty of horses got lost in all that sound.

Not eating was a way to reclaim my body, so when I leaned forward too soon, or my elbows shifted from my sides, or my heels creped up, I had a success to fall back on. Of course, I also hoped to become so delicate that someone would notice I could break. I cut my food into small pieces and moved the pieces around my plate, so no one would comment that I hadn't lifted the fork to my mouth.

I remember running my palms down the bones of my ribcage, and realizing that my idea of perfection did not include me, and I either needed to see that through or find one that did. There's an end to anorexia. One day your hand shakes or it doesn't. My own have never been able to maintain a straight line. My lines slant upwards, always.

After I started eating again, there was a long space of nothing. My body, which had connected me to beauty all my life, failed. I stopped riding, and without rhythm or line, I lay too long in the bath each day. As the warm water cooled against my skin, I tried to hold my head under for longer and longer. But nothing good has ever taken my breath away—and I've always wanted good things.

So, I started looking for an art that did not depend on my body. I wanted an art that was visual, but not primarily concerned with appearance, as painting is. I wanted an art that spoke without sound, as poetry does. I wanted an art that I could hear, but not in the lingering notes of a cello. I wanted something that spoke without sound, as poetry can. Words slow the world. They put spaces between what in life exists without spaces. My father gave me the words of poets when no one else's words could reach me. I wrote them again and again in black ink across a white page until they became a part of my hands.

*After my weary body I had rested,  
The way resumed I on the desert slope  
So that the firm foot ever was the lower.  
(Canto I, Dante's Inferno)*

These words have strength and rhythm and line. After I'd learned them and many others, I began to write my own. And once in awhile, once in a long while, words do what I cannot. They reclaim the hunger for beauty that I have lost, hunger I feel in my teeth and in my gasping breath.



*St. Louis*

As soon as I was old enough, I started to take long walks through St. Louis. Our neighborhood is entered through wrought-iron gates attached to stone columns, but the gate is always open. Other neighborhoods have closed gates, and instead of columns, narrow stone gatehouses for watchmen long since replaced by numerical codes. The public is not always allowed to walk in those neighborhoods, although they are beautiful to walk in, with tall trees that achieved their grace with years. The houses are so carefully built that they seem less like homes and more like representations of people as they would like to be seen, strong and beautiful—houses built for a world where ages means accumulation not loss.

The poet Howard Nemerov liked to walk through those neighborhoods, ignoring the signs marked private. Nemerov often wore a denim jacket and jeans while he walked, his gray hair wild above his soft blue eyes. Someone saw him walking from their window, complaints were made, and he was banned (despite his Pulitzer, his Guggenheim, his two appointments as Poet Laureate of the United States). Perhaps he thought of those trees and those neighborhoods when he wrote of, “the file of giant trees/whose order satisfied and stood for some/euclidean ancestor’s dream about truth.”

The ban outraged a lot of people and other neighborhoods put up signs saying, “Howard Nemerov is welcome to walk here.” They welcomed him with pride. As a formalist poet, interested in balance, I hope the latter gesture softened the snub in his mind.

I also love to walk in the Botanical Gardens, especially on weekdays after school field-trip hours, when I can walk the raked oval Japanese Garden’s raked gravel paths and pretend that it is mine. The St. Louis Botanical Gardens, Shaw Park, and Tower Grove Park were all

donated to the city by Henry Shaw. Shaw's will stipulated that the head of the Gardens be provided a house on the grounds and a carriage (now car). These practical gestures also provided future directors with the two components most necessary to love his gardens, or to love anything—closeness and the ability to ride away.

If places retain the tone of their occupants, Henry Shaw must have been a lovely man. In early evening, golden light hits a walkway enclosed by white blossoming trees and the faint sweetness of their smell envelops you. Shaw's papers reveal that he used dashes instead of periods—no endings, just breaths. So, I assume he would be pleased that many locals still refer to the Gardens affectionately, respectfully, as Shaw's Gardens.

I rarely walk by the Mississippi, that brown and muddy river that is referred to with the reckless femininity so often designated by men to hurricanes and nature when she's larger than a park and harder to shape to hand. *She* is a mighty river. Huckleberry Finn belonged to no other waters, but the casino boats attract a rough crowd. The son of a family friend was robbed at gunpoint by the river. The robber told her son to withdraw money from the nearby ATM. The son was a student, busy paying off loans and trying to find a job with no more than a liberal arts degree. While the son withdrew money, he began to cry and say how worried he was about what to do after graduation, that he didn't know how to make it on his own. The robber took the bills from his hand, turned to leave, walked a few steps, and turned back. The son braced himself for a shot, but instead, the robber handed him back half of the money, and ran away.

The Mississippi River gives off a similar aura of decency limited by desperation. It has an unsentimental, practical, we're-in-this-together-but-me-first mentality that feels more real

and secure than generosity. Or maybe these are just things I want to believe, because I think people are shaped by the landscapes they grow up in.

*Bennington*

I moved away from St. Louis to attend Bennington College. The school rests at the end of a long green drive. In summer months, the side of the road is dotted with delicate blue and yellow wild flowers. My initial impression was that nothing bad could happen in a place so beautiful. On one of my first nights, I walked down the gravel road to a large bonfire at “The End Of The World.” Someone explained to me that “The End Of The World” was what the stone border at the end of the college green was called. Too much brush had been piled on top of the fire, and the kindling popped and burnt haphazardly. The sky beyond it was black, and when I had walked far enough away from the flames, I had trouble seeing my shoes on the dirt path.

I went to Bennington to study poetry, but mainly took dance classes. The dancers were less neurotic than the writers, and I liked the way dancers moved through space, as though they were always barefoot on a wooden floor. One of my dance classes began with students lying on the floor, our arms and legs spread wide, as our teacher prompted us to let go of the tension in each part of our body. She asked us to imagine that we were jellyfish, our limbs undifferentiated, our intentions singular. I tried to do as she asked, but my mind wandered. Sometimes I fell asleep during those exercises and woke up to the sound of bodies rising to their feet around me.

I was always tired after the sunshine ceded to the sprawling gray and white winter. After one dance class, I returned to my dorm room to see a red light blinking beside the white phone mounted on the wall. I dragged the dial through varying stages of the circumference of a circle, as we did then. When I reached the answering service, a tense voice told me to come

to the administration building immediately. There was a strange sound in the background that I mistook for laughter.

As I walked up the path, I practiced my apology, “I’m so sorry for falling asleep in class. I’m just really tired. I’ll do better.” I scraped the snow off my soles of my shoes in the entryway, and as I walked through the door, I realized that it wasn’t laughing I had heard in the background of the message. My friends were wrapped in each other’s arms on a wooden bench. They were in the midst of something I was still separate from. No one moved towards me. I suppose no one wanted to say what had happened, because the more people knew, the truer it became. In the beginning, there was a sort of frantic faith in the magic of silence to reverse things.

As I walked toward them, my friend Mikey stood to meet me, and although it must have felt like speaking underwater for him—the words robbing him of precious air—Mikey told me that our friend had died. I learned later that Becca’s body was warm to the touch when campus security took her down. Did they cut the cord she used? Or untie the knot? I didn’t ask. The dorm rooms were heated to stifling in winter, and many students kept their windows open during the night, when the heat made it difficult to sleep. Since Becca hung herself in the late morning, her body might have been warm because they *almost* caught her in time, or simply because she hadn’t opened the window. The detail seemed important at the time.

I started crying, and I dug my cheek into Mikey’s shoulder. He rested his chin on top of my head, but every muscle in his body was tensed. I don’t remember, but I was told later that I could barely breathe, and Mikey was worried, as we all were at that time, that more of the people he cared about would stop breathing.

Seven years later, I hardly remember the person I grieved for. The Becca I knew was a person with friends and family and a future. She often stroked her chin with her thumb and fore finger. She was very skinny, but not in a deliberate or fashionable way. One Halloween Becca wore an uncharacteristically short black dress, red lipstick, and high heels. Her costume was “SEX.” Becca moved surprisingly smoothly in heels. Had she practiced walking in them? When a handsome guy made a pass at her, she left the party to look for her prematurely balding boyfriend. He had heart problems and tried not to smoke cigarettes. She rarely went anywhere without him. The day Becca killed herself, her boyfriend had only left her alone for an hour, so he could have a conference with his thesis advisor. He screamed when he found her and after, although by the time I saw him he was sitting perfectly still in the administration building, both of his hands gripping the edge of the bench, as though someone would drag him from it. Becca didn’t leave a note. Her favorite color was orange. She was buried in an orange sweatshirt.

Many years later, I wrote a short essay on the color orange. The color has haunted me ever since. The night before Becca’s memorial service on campus, we snuck into the building and painted the walls orange. We spread tarps and ran masking tape around the edges of the walls to insure a clean line, but the brush strokes showed after only one coat of paint, so we had to paint another. When we had finished one wall, my arms were tired from the motion of reaching upward. I rarely raise my arms from my side for that length of time. Some of us started murmuring that perhaps one wall was enough, because it was nearly two in the morning and we were all tired.

Then, Mikey dipped his paint brush in the orange paint can and splattered orange paint jaggedly across the remaining three walls. Mikey was a modern dancer. He always moved as if he were balancing on the balls of his feet, but that night he walked on his heels,

and the decency and wanting of that ungraceful, jagged movement of his wrist made the rest of us feel like the children we were, in wonder at the majesty that sometimes comes with pain.

At Becca's memorial the next morning, in the freshly painted orange room that we denied knowing anything about, Becca's boyfriend said that her face was imprinted on the inside of his eyelids, and every time he closed his eyes, he saw her, and opened them quickly, hoping she would be there...and every time, she wasn't. His speech devastated me, because the night before I had had a dream about Becca. In the dream, Becca said someone had taken one of her mittens (she always wore red mittens in life), and she wanted it back. The ground was cold. Every muscle in my body contracted as she moved towards me and I told her that she didn't belong here anymore. She had to go. Now. I woke up terrified and climbed guiltily out of bed to close the window.

A few nights later, I walked back to my dorm across the college green, but of course, it was white then, the snow had stuck for several days. I strained to place my feet in the existing boot prints, because I wasn't wearing boots, and I didn't want the snow against my bare ankles, but the person whose footprints I followed had a stride longer than my own. The moon shone on the snow, but I don't remember any other lights. When I think of Bennington it is all bonfires or near blackness.

*The Boy Story*

When Becca died, I had trouble thinking of anything else. I took long walks up the gravel roads to the music building. The building was an old stone house on the top of the hill that many students said was haunted, because the rooms had unexpected drafts of cold air and doors would open on their own sometimes. And perhaps because of that rumor, or because of the long walk, the building was almost always empty on winter nights. I'd open the heavy wooden door to a practice room and sit on the piano bench.

Since I do not play piano and cannot remember a tune, I would press the softest keys in a gentle pattern until the sound of it silenced my thoughts. I liked the feeling of my fingers against the smooth surface of the keys. Sometimes I'd run my hands across them without pressing down, feeling the spaces between the white ones, then the blacks. The white keys were bigger and closer to each other, and there were more of them. But when I got outside, the opposite was true. The stars were merely pinpricks of white in a black sky, and by the time I got back to my room, the silence I had created was gone.

If I wrote then as I do now, I would have described that time through my attempt to recreate a melody that I didn't know the words to, on a piano I couldn't play. But at the time, I needed something else. So, I wrote a series of anecdotes about a family of four young boys who lose their father. Every morning, the oldest boy asks where his dad is, hoping to get a different answer. One morning his mother says, "When someone dies, they go around the next corner. And no matter how quickly you run, they'll always be just one corner ahead." So the boy begins to hate corners. When he grows up, he moves to Wyoming, where he can see the land spread before him in every direction, for miles.



I wrote the “boy” story in a blue spiral notebook that I carried everywhere. When I went with friends to coffee shops with large windows, they would read and I would write. I began writing in pencil, but the lead began to smudge. The words became less distinct, grays overlapping each other and running into the white margins. Then I switched to pen but made too many mistakes and covered the pages with thick scratch-outs that looked like wounds. Eventually, I typed out what I had.

I didn't think the repetition of a piano would comfort a little boy, so I gave him a train: *The night after his father's funeral, Tommy sat alone in the kitchen, because the yellow walls made him feel safe, and he didn't know what else to do. His mother took him onto her lap, even though he was almost too big now. She rested her chin on the top of his head and smiled slightly. His hair smelled like her coconut shampoo. She'd been running out more quickly than usual and now she knew why. They looked through a few books, one about a bear who wakes up at a construction site, one about the wind telling a child stories about her neighbors. Neither interested Tommy, and he asked her to tell him a story about trains. She told him trains never end, they go and go forever, like the sound, repeating itself and moving forward... Tommy didn't believe her, but then he never looked for the end of one either. When Tommy saw a train coming, he watched it approach and then turned away.*

*St. John's College*

I transferred colleges after Becca's death. When I arrived at St. John's College, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, I was wearing a thin cotton dress with flowers of a dark blue that I have never seen in nature. My chest was burnt, because I didn't like the greasy feeling that thick, white sunscreen leaves in its wake. The altitude had made my voice breathier than usual and the backs of my heels were bloody from walking too far in new sandals. That's how the whole experience felt at first, like I didn't have the right shoes to keep going.

As part of a comprehensive classics and philosophy curriculum, St. John's requires every student to take four years of math and science. Part of these classes is demonstrating mathematical propositions from memory. While I could memorize pages of poetry, memorizing pages of equations and diagrams seemed impossible. I quickly learned that no one speaks while you're at the board, except to ask questions, and you can't sit down until the proposition is complete. If you don't know how to do something, you figure it out in front of the whole class.

The first time I was called to the board, my palms were sweaty and I felt the metallic taste in the back of my throat that comes with real, animal fear. There was a gentle breeze blowing through the open window. The broad strokes of a felt eraser had left a soft dusting of chalk, and I could still make out a shape here and there. I stared at the outlines of those figures, hoping they would trigger my understanding. The quiet was so encompassing that it almost hummed with tension. My lines wavered and my voice dropped to a near whisper.

When everyone else had pushed in their chairs and picked up their books, I asked my math tutor if I could speak with him (St. John's College professors are called tutors).

"Why can't I ask for help at the board?"

He looked at me blankly. A half hour earlier, my eyes had filled with tears when he asked me to reason through a step that wasn't explained in the book. So many of the propositions were unexplained.

“Because if someone helped you at the board, it would be out of *pity*.”

He said the word distastefully, as though he it was something he had tried and decided against.

“*Pity* is profoundly disrespectful among equals. If you want to be disrespected go some where else.”

That's the constant refrain at St. John's: if you don't like the way we do things, leave. Many do, and although I considered leaving many times, I chose to stay.

Two or three times a week for four years, I was called to perform propositions at the board. I often had bruises under my knees, because when I finally sat down, I lifted my feet to the seat of the chair and unconsciously dug my knees into the side of the oval table. Staring at the blackboard in dread and resentment did not make me better at math, but forcing myself to stand and walk to the board year after year taught me to respect myself. When I finally turned away from it and looked into the faces of my friends, I realized that it didn't matter if I made a mistake, as long as I had done the work and made an honest effort.

The qualification is essential, because students are told that the object of our education is not to learn *skills*, but to learn how to approach a problem without a solution. When I wrote this essay, I read through some of my early math papers. Unsurprisingly, their most defining feature is attempting not to talk about math while talking about math. But it's also possible to see that I was trying to articulate how being a part of that community gave me a sense of self. As I wrote in an early math paper on Euclid's "Elements": *One unit cannot be*

*a number, because as the common unit of measure, it cannot measure itself. It is only through its relationships to other things, that a unit acquires meaning.*

*Phoenix*

The summer after I graduated from St. John's College, I moved to from Santa Fe to Phoenix to teach kindergarten. After studying philosophy for four years, I wanted a break from questions without answers. My mind was tired. One morning at recess, I saw a little boy sitting alone on a rock, tracing circles in the dust with the toe of a black lace-up shoe he was too young to tie. Although he was not in my kindergarten class, I remembered this boy's name, because he cried every morning when his mother dropped him off at school.

"Hi, Luke. What are you thinking about?"

He looked at me vaguely, "I'm thinking about if I was a germ. I could float wherever I wanted...I wish I was a germ."

I nodded, and looking at the wire fence surrounding the playground and the concrete beyond it, I thought, "I wish I was a germ."

The school community was deeply religious. During the first fire drill of the school year, I was holding hands with a five-year-old girl who seemed unusually frightened.

"It's okay. It's just a practice."

She furrowed her brow until horizontal lines were almost visible beneath her blond bangs.

"Are the fires that burn people the same fires that burn sinners in hell?"

I looked around, but there was no one else to answer her, "No."

She continued to look up at me expectantly, so I tried to imagine what I would say if I believed in God, as her parents do.

"Maybe, if there is a hell and sinners are there, then the grace of God puts out the fires that burn them, like firemen put out the fires that burn buildings."

The day after I spoke to Luke about being a germ, another kindergartner asked me to play with her at recess.

"Actually, I want to see what Luke's up to. He's always doing fun things. Do you want to come with me?"

As we walked over, I whispered, "You know, Luke is *sooooo* cool. I wonder who he plays with. They must be pretty cool, too."

Luke's delicate shoulders were hunched over a mound of dirt. He looked up at us and squinted his eyes in the sunshine.

"I'm building a house for the ants. It's too hot for them."

I smiled, it was too hot for all of us, then frowned.

"Oh, no! I can't sit in the dirt in this dress." I looked down at the little girl beside me. "Will you help Luke? So I know what to do next time?"

After a month or two, Luke had lots of friends. He stopped crying when his mother dropped him off at school and waved his hand up and down but did not stop when he ran past me on the playground.

Around the time I first saw Luke, the faculty hosted a pool party for new teachers. While we were sitting around the pool drinking beer in our bathing suits, someone mentioned learning Russian.

I smiled, "One of my boyfriends in college taught me a few words. It's a beautiful language."

There was a long pause, then, "You had more than one boyfriend in college?"

After a couple beers, another teacher pulled me aside and described Christian courting.

"None of my friends date without intending to marry the person they're dating."

She looked at me sympathetically, "Don't those relationships feel like a waste now that they're over?"

I ran my fingers through my hair, squeezed the cold aluminum can in my hand, and said, "No, I believe a relationship can be valuable even if it ends."

I only taught in Phoenix for one year, but in that year I came to love palm trees, although they offer no real shade, cactus flowers, although they have no smell, and the kindergartner's jokes, although they make no sense.

"Knock, knock."

"Who's there?"

"Orange."

"Orange who?"

"Apple."

At the end of the school year, Luke's mother came to me in tears. She was small-boned, and like Luke moved lightly on her feet. She hugged me and lifted her hands to my shoulders. "We know God sent you to us. God put you in our child's path." She looked into my eyes steadily and I desperately wanted to say something in return, so I told her one of the few things I believe without questioning, "Thank you. Luke is the coolest kid I know."

*Jodie*

Every weekday, Jodie waited outside the glass doors of the kindergarten classroom with all the other mothers. She was, by far, my favorite. Despite the unblinking sun of Arizona, Jodie never wore sunglasses or a hat—just an increasing number of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Her son Ethan was one of the few children who didn't spend all morning looking towards the glass doors. Jodie was the tallest mother, 5'11" at least, and Ethan knew she would come on time, and when she did he would not miss her.

The first time Ethan's father came to pick him up with Jodie, I assumed he was Jodie's younger brother. He had on an electric-blue tie, a button-up shirt, and jeans. He was very handsome. He held out his hand to me with an open palm and picked up Ethan in both his arms.

Jodie volunteered in the classroom two mornings a week. She did all the things that kindergarten teachers need to do that don't involve teaching—photocopying, sharpening pencils, reorganizing books, cutting out shapes. She helped out wherever she could. It made a huge difference. Some mornings, I would bring coffee for myself and my co-teacher. I asked Jodie if I could bring her a coffee, and she said no thanks.

After she left the classroom, my co-teacher turned to me,

“Jodie's Mormon, Caitlin, she doesn't drink coffee or alcohol. No stimulants.”

I didn't know anything about the Mormon faith, so I just said, “Oh, I'll have to think of something else.”

I never did.



Jodie has four children. The eldest is a girl, sixteen, and then three boys. Ethan is her youngest. And her last child, she told me. She met her husband on a Mormon service mission to Africa. She was twenty-one, he was eighteen. In pictures from their wedding, she is radiantly happy. Beaming. Her frame is willowy in those photos. She looks like a different person, fresh and full in her cheeks. She is heavier now. Or maybe it is just the impression her shoes force on her. In summer, she wears heavy clogs that must take energy to lift with each step. In winter, she wears boots with thick soles. Their leather hangs a little around her ankles. In the wedding photos, her husband looks rounder than he is now, but in all the photos, he looks at her, and she looks at the camera smiling.

The day after her fortieth birthday, Jodie came into the classroom looking tired. She was wearing a knit sweater that came almost to her knees and skirt that brushed her ankles. I asked what she did for her birthday as we sat correcting math lessons, while the children were at gym class. Their mistakes were easy to identify—  $2-1=2$  or  $1+1=3$ —and could be corrected while chatting. Mostly, it was just nice to talk to an adult.

“My husband forgot my birthday...no, it’s okay. He knows he messed up. We’ll do something in a week or so.”

Jodie often posts pictures of her family on the internet. She studied anthropology in college, but she’s also an accomplished photographer. She described photography to me as “a way to choose what to remember and how.” In her photographs, everyone is smiling.

*Max*

1.

When I left Phoenix, I moved to Brooklyn and started looking after two little boys. Max is almost four years old and his younger brother, Walt, is eleven months. Both boys wake up early, though less early than they used to. They have mellowed from a shrill five o'clock cry to a more civilized seven o'clock cry. Their parents tell me that Max sometimes tip-toes into their room in the morning, and if they are sleeping he goes back and plays with plastic cars until they wake up.

They laugh as they tell me.

"Max knows he's been really good to let us sleep, so as soon as we walk into his bedroom he asks to watch a show."

I nanny for their family three days a week. I used to nanny five days a week, but once I started graduate school, I had to cut back. I leave my apartment at eight, and if the subway is on time I arrive at their brownstone at nine. By nine, Max has already been dressed twice. First, Max is dressed in the clothes he'll wear to school (he favors sweatpants because jeans are hard "in every way"). Then, Max is dressed in black snow pants cuffed at the bottoms of each leg, black rubber boots that go up to his knees, and a gray down jacket that fits him perfectly.

One of Max's parents walks him to school each morning, the other hands me his younger brother, Walt. Walt is already very strong willed. Walt only stops fussing when we go for a walk outside. So despite the weather I get him ready for a walk. I put Walt in a long-

sleeved onesie, fleece pants, a knit sweater, and socks, and put him into a thick, full-bodied fleece coat with a hood.

Then, I zip him into the sleeping-bag-like seat blanket that I attached to the stroller seat. Our walks are fairly aimless, so we notice even the people who walk quickly past us with their chins down, hands in their pockets, and shoulders hunched. For Walt, these people are still just a series of passing images. He watches people pass and then lets them go.

At eleven, Walt and I walk to pick up Max from pre-school. I have to keep Walt in the stroller, because I used to buckle Walt into a pouch on my chest and walk everywhere. After a few months, my back hurt so badly I could barely pick up anything. So, now we use the large black stroller that bumps into other people's ankles and only turns with effort.

When Walt and I get out on Max's floor, I park the stroller a few feet away from Max's classroom, so I can catch Max's brown eyes as he leaps from sitting with crossed legs to standing faster than I ever thought possible. Before Max leaves the classroom door, he shakes his teacher's hand and looks him in the eye. Max's teacher asks each child to do this, because he wants to teach them to be less afraid.

When Max walks out the door, he looks at me and shouts.

"What are we doing today?!?! What are we doing today?!"

I swing him up into my arms.

"If you could do anything in the world, what would you do?"

I already know the answer.

"Cars!"

"If you could do anything in the world, you would play cars?"

I raise one eyebrow.

"Yeah!!!!"

Max runs over to Walt. Walt's sleeping, so Max knows to back away from the stroller softly. He's a careful child. Max makes sure not to push his brother over, or grab things from Walt's hands, as many of his friends do to their younger siblings.

Once when Walt would not stop crying, I had to stop playing with Max (we were probably playing cars), so I could rock Walt in my arms. I looked at Max.

"Walt's such a drag sometimes, huh? Thank goodness he's going to grow into a big boy like you soon. He'll be so much more fun when he doesn't cry all the time."

Max furrowed his brow and looked at me very seriously.

"Caitlin, he's not crying, that's just how he talks."

I smiled.

"Max, you know who's the best kid ever?"

"Me and Walt."

"No."

"Me?"

"That's the one."

That day at school, Max walked quietly away from the stroller. Walt did not wake up, so Max and I began the dance of snow pants, rubber boots, his down jacket, and the warm hat that Max still doesn't like to wear. He likes this hat better than the hat with warm flaps that tie beneath his chin, but that isn't saying a lot. We take awhile to walk home, because Max can barely bend his knees in his tall rubber boots.

When we get to the stairs of their brownstone, I open the door and carry Walt up to his crib. Max walks slowly up the stairs after me, so when I come back down for the stroller we can "race" up the stairs (in our races we hold the railing and walk quickly but still carefully). Sometimes Max wins, sometimes I win. I used let Max win every time, but then I saw him lose to another child and throw a fit. After that, we played fair.

When we get to Max's room, I take the laundry from the dryer and put it on his bed to fold later.

"What do you want to do, Max-Max?"

I know the answer, but I'm hoping Max'll change his mind at the last minute and say, "I want to color" or "I want to read" or even "I want to hunt for sharks under the kitchen table." Unlike me, Max always knows what he wants.

"Cars!"

## *Orange*

Lately Max knows two things for sure, he is three years old and orange is his favorite color. He points to a car on the street.

“I like that car.”

That car is orange.

“Of course you do.”

Max is loyal to the color. He holds it as closely as the four thin cotton blankets folded on his pillows that he carries upstairs to have lunch with him. He’s scared of the carved faces of pumpkins. He wonders where their souls are—but respects their orange. Max won’t taste the smoothie I make with blueberries, raspberries, and bananas. It is not the color of the one I made yesterday with mango, peaches, and strawberries. He wouldn’t eat that one, either, but it looked right. I wish I was as blindly loyal to anything as Max is to orange. The world is simple for him now—orange and not orange. He likes the orange parts.

I see the color differently. Orange like the sweatshirt Becca was buried in. The orange of cones cautioning walkers and cars. The orange hand, which means ‘stop’ at traffic signals. The stiff cotton orange of jumpsuits. The color of crime recognized in people. But orange is also the color of the setting sun. Of leaves in autumn. The warm light of fires. The color of the ends of things—passing by. If someone brings you orange flowers, it is not passion. The feeling may be greater, friendship even, but never, not once, the passion of red. And yet orange lacks the acceptance of violet, the sadness of a fading pink, it will not let go of what it cannot be.

Max does not compare orange to other colors. He does not say, “I love orange less than red, more than brown, but not always, only on cool days.” As an adult it is harder to love as a child loves, without comparison, without compassion to an alternative—that is no longer the way I love most things. But when I ask Max what shirt he wants to wear, I find my eyes shifting from a white and blue striped shirt to an orange and gray, thinking, “Please kid, stick with orange for the both of us.”

*Subway*

One afternoon in college, I decided to make crème brûlée. The process shouldn't be hard, but each step requires discernment—whisk in egg yolks until they lighten slightly in color, add cream a little at a time, bake just until the crème brûlée is set but still trembling in the center. If any of the steps are misjudged, the whole dessert is ruined. Not even the satisfaction of cracking the caramelized sugar top with a spoon can disguise a custard that's runny or curdled. I've thrown out more than I've kept. Luckily, the consistency worked that day.

In the evening, I brought it to my boyfriend's apartment. When I opened the door, he was already a little drunk. I found out later that he had just eaten a stick of butter on a dare. His friends had brought a thirty rack of beer and were sitting on the sofa surrounded by crushed aluminum cans. I set the desserts on the table and went to the bathroom. There was no toilet paper. When I came back into the living room, his friends were eating the desserts with knives, because they didn't want to wash the dirty spoons in the sink. I tried to keep my face blank as thickened cream slid off the flat knives onto their faces or sank into the blue carpet.

My boyfriend followed me out, took my hand from the cold metal car door, and warmed it in between both his own.

"Let me come home with you."

His thumbs rubbed into my palm. I stepped closer and slid my hands underneath his sweater and around the smooth skin of his back following the curve to his spine.

"I just want to sleep on my stomach tonight and take up a lot of room. I'll spend the night tomorrow."



He looked down at me very seriously and frowned. He has beautiful pale eyes. They are kind in a way that makes you want to cover them.

We always disagreed about the color of my eyes. They are brown around the pupil, then green, then circled by a thin line of blue. I say my eyes are brown, because brown is the deepest layer. He says green, because green is what you see most in bright light. His are always a pale blue, and when the wrinkles past the edge of his eyes show, they are smiling. I have trouble remembering how his eyes looked in the changing light, because we broke up before I could see them with my eyes closed.

During that conversation he said, "Caitlin, I want you to need me."

I pulled my hands back into the cold air and placed them on either side of his jaw. I wanted to laugh, because he'd just eaten a stick of butter on a dare and yet he thought I was the one who needed looking after, but he'd meant to be kind.

"I don't need you, but I still want you. Don't you see how that's better?"

In the end, he didn't.

I've had some version of this conversation with almost every man I've dated. I don't know the resolution to these conflicting desires, how to be strong enough not to need someone and delicate enough to make him feel needed. So more often than not I don't know who to be. Sometimes I feel the strain across my narrow shoulders and down my arms, through my legs (smooth from oils and lotion yet still not thin enough for my taste), and heavy on my feet. The feeling is strongest at sunset when the soft light of dusk fades and I am under the hard fluorescent overhead lights of a subway car. When the subway car jerks

forward and I stumble back, I would like to feel my boyfriend's hands squeeze my waist steady, but in the absence of that I hold onto the metal bar.

A few evenings ago, I was on a very crowded train. Even the rubber edges of peoples' shoes were pressed up against each other. Whenever there was a pocket of space, I shifted my plastic grocery bags and the leather bag on my shoulder. The bags were too heavy for my arms, so I was relieved when the woman seated below me zipped her purse and scooted to the rounded edge of her seat. She got off at the next stop. As I turned to sit in her place, a man brushed past me, as though he were exiting the train. I stepped back to let him by, and he took the empty seat.

He was middle-aged, short, reasonably well-dressed—just an average guy. After he sat down, his eyes immediately went to the black floor dotted with flecks of red and white, so he didn't see me glaring at him. I was furious.

Some of my guy friends disagreed.

"If you want to be treated equally, then you have to admit a man has as much right to a seat as you do."

I paused.

"I'll never be treated equally."

## *Aging*

I was walking quickly behind two men on the sidewalk on the Upper West Side. One man was in his seventies or eighties. His hair was white, and although he had all of it, the texture was fine and you could see each strand combed neatly to the side. He was wearing a crisp light-blue cotton shirt, the collar looked like it had just been ironed. His shirt was tucked into similarly pressed kaki pants, and fastened by a brown leather. His shoes had laces. He had obviously dressed with care. The man beside him was younger, maybe his son, because he spoke to the older man with affection and fear.

"We've done pretty well. Just three more blocks uphill. Are you okay with that?"

"Yes."

I was walking faster than the men were, and I passed them guiltily. The older man had a handsome face. He must have been a very handsome man all his life, but now I looked at him with concern, not desire.

Yesterday on the subway, I tried to give my seat to an older man. He was in a grey suit and polished black-leather shoes. His wife was sitting next to me with a playbill in her hand. She seemed flustered and spoke to her husband abruptly. I halfway rose from the orange subway seat.

"Would you like to sit together?"

I deliberately asked him to join his wife, not to take my seat—an offer of courtesy, not pity. He looked mortified anyway. His brown eyes met mine briefly and then looked quickly to the side.

"No, no. Please sit down."

I sat back down. He held onto a metal pole with one hand and held his leather briefcase in the other. The briefcase swayed in his hand and touched a nearby woman's leg. His wife immediately tugged on his suit coat.

"You're hitting that woman's leg with your case!"

He moved his briefcase and clinched his fingers firmly around the handle. I could see the veins in his hand and the resigned look on his face pained me. I didn't look up for the rest of the subway ride.

My father is the same way. After a long day, he will offer his seat on the subway to any nearby woman. I hate the women who accept while he sways with low blood sugar. Needing to sit is nothing to be ashamed of, and surely being seventy years old and a good man all your life, are things to take pride in. My parents are embarrassed of their age, as if it were something that should be hidden or denied. The denial scares me, but I try not to think of the people I love aging, too. I'll talk about anything else, do anything else to distract myself from the reality of aging, which is infinity stranger than any story, stranger than the white space that will follow this sentence, because I don't know what else to say.

## *Garbage*

Since I'm moving to another part of Brooklyn, most of my things are in garbage bags. I carried the heavy items out weeks ago, the table and chairs, the heavy wooden planter that Sam set under the photograph of a clothesline at dusk, the shirts blown full with the breeze. The super helped carry the deep blue couch with the coral and turquoise pattern on its armrests that reminded us of shutters in Santa Fe. When I finally set the couch on the cement and lowered my arms, nothing was easier than turning and walking away.

I stacked a pile of books in the window. I have to keep the thick ones with the familiar names, no one would take my copies anyway. One summer in Paris, the only time I've ever been to Europe, I ripped my copy of "War and Peace" in half so my bag would rest lighter on my shoulder. I still have both halves. I haven't read the books without coffee stains on their covers, without sentences rewritten in the margins, and dog-eared pages. Many of those books went to the curb, all the ones with too many "I"s in the first paragraph and crisp white pages.

I took my dresses off the hangers and folded them flat. Most are cotton sundresses with spaghetti straps. The hems fall mid-thigh, so I can feel the air against my knees as I'm walking. After my first summer in New York, I exchanged dresses with bright colors for darker ones. Fewer comments on the street. The shape stayed the same. I folded the other clothes into piles, and when they started to lean, made a pile of throwaways. The throwaway pile included sweaters whose knit had come undone (they would only further unravel) and the dense navy sweater that lost its softness when I accidentally washed it with the others.

I reluctantly dropped the gold and black sandals I wore everyday last summer into the trash can. I considered reaching back in for them, but I closed the lid instead. The sandals'

straps were held together by safety pins and the soles had worn so thin I could feel the uneven surface of the sidewalk against the arch of my foot. If I had taken the sandals to a cobbler sooner, maybe the straps could have been reattached, but the fabric disintegrated. The pieces no longer reach each other.

Each summer I fall in love with one pair of hopelessly delicate sandals and walk for miles each day in them. When I have nothing else to do, I walk; when I am lonely, I walk; when I don't understand, I walk. I look at the tops of buildings and what little I can see of the sky. My chin is always raised in the city. I miss looking straight and seeing sky.

I used to buy white garbage bags, and now I buy black ones. I say (to myself, because no one else notices the color of my trash bags) that I switched because the black ones are more durable. That is true. It is also harder to see the outlines of objects I've thrown away.

*Part 2: Weathers*

## *Cold*

The first time I met Simon, he was forty-five minutes late to our blind date. It was a starkly cold day, emptied of distraction. Deep into February, the snowfall had lost its softness on the ground. Black snow was piled on either side of the streets and under cars. The wind was biting. There were few people on the sidewalk. The ones who were outside were so covered in dark coats and hats that you could only see their eyes and the tops of their noses sticking out from collars and scarves.

We planned to meet at a diner in a neighborhood I did not know very well. The diner was in a building with old wood-shingled houses on either side. The houses were painted in varying shades of blue grey. It was the type of restaurant people go out of their way to find, without obvious street numbers or nearby subways.

The diner wouldn't seat me alone and there were no coffee shops or grocery stores nearby where I could warm up, clenching and unclenching my fists until my fingers moved easily again. So I started walking down the street anyway, hoping to find a store around the corner, or perhaps a block or two away. My chin was tucked tightly against my neck, so all I could see were the cracks in the uneven sidewalk. I walked twenty minutes down the street until I got to a coffee shop.

The black coffee was too hot to drink right away, but it warmed my hands through the paper cup. As I pushed a black plastic lid onto the brim, Simon sent a text that he'd be at the diner in 15 minutes. So, I put a few thin napkins in my pocket and started to walk back. On the way, I switched the coffee between my hands every couple minutes. While one hand warmed up in my pocket, the other held the coffee. I blew my nose with the napkins and raised my head from my scarf before I turned the corner.



Simon had on a bright blue windbreaker and thick gloves. He smiled when he saw me.

"I know, I know, I'm the worst..."

Simon looked older than he had in photos. He was still handsome, but his skin was stretched tight around his eyes.

"I should say it's fine, but I'm too cold. You are the worst."

Simon smiled warmly.

"How can I make it up to you?"

"I love breakfast."

He nodded energetically a few times and laughed.

"Reasonable demands, I think I can manage that."

Soon after, we were seated on opposite sides of a small rectangular wooden table. It had just enough room for two plates. Simon ordered a breakfast bowl of tater tots, scrambled eggs, sautéed onion, jack cheese, and guacamole. Mine had home-fries sautéed with beets, tomatoes, roasted pepper, and spinach topped with two fried eggs. They were big helpings.

We were both hungry and our bowls were quickly empty. But the waiter generously refilled our coffee cups again and again, smiling gently. We each drank seven cups of black coffee. I found out Simon is from California, the youngest of three brothers.

"When I was a little boy, my brothers would sometimes jump on my bed and shake me awake screaming, 'Simon, Simon, wake up! It's Christmas!' I'd jump out of bed and take a few steps before I heard them laughing and realized, 'Hey, it's July!'"

Simon was an art director, and the owner of a small black terrier who followed him home a few years ago. He apologized for being late.

"I was late this morning because my friend had a winter 'barbecue' in his apartment. I made ribs and then we drank a bunch and I just couldn't get out of bed. That's one of the reasons I brought my dog out from California. I needed a reason to stop drinking and go home."

After breakfast, as we were walking to the subway, walking into the wind, my teeth started chattering. Simon put his hands on both my shoulders.

"We're in Hawaii. We're at the beach. The sun's out. The sand is warm...You're in Hawaii."

Simon's hands are warm. He has thick fingers and blunt-square cut nails. They are strong hands, steady ones.

A few weeks later, we went for a walk on the High Line, the walking path built on above-ground railroad tracks on Manhattan's West Side. There is a beautiful view of the water, and in warmer months trees and plants bud and vender's carts sell strawberry popsicles and molasses-ginger cookies. Unfortunately, that day we had to walk impatiently behind the groups of people spread over the paths. There was no gap to slip through. Snow was piled up and melting on either side of the tracks. In one section, couples sat intertwined on cold wooden benches. We stood on the side by the railing and looked at the water. Simon stood behind me and rested his chin near the crook of my neck.

"Want to go back to my house and warm up?"

"I really, really do."

In winter, Simon wears a thick beard. He's not good at shaving his neck. I've never run the backs of my fingers up and down that vulnerable soft skin on the side of his jaw not covered in short, sharp hairs. His beard is much darker than the dirty blond on the top of his

head. I imagine him starting to trim his beard, turning sideways in his bathroom mirror, and thinking, "Good enough." It is. I like way his beard feels against my neck.

Simon visited my apartment several times before I saw his apartment. My apartment is sparsely furnished but clean. It has lots of light, white walls, white curtains, a grey wool blanket, and a full fridge. Simple. Whenever Simon visits my house, he says he wants to move in.

"I'll just give you my lease and I'll take yours."

"And I can clean up your house and stock the shelves and then you'll move back?"

"Exactly."

"That sounds really great for you."

"Yeah, think about it."

We visit his place after our walk on the High Line. As soon as I walk through the door, I want to go home, too. There are rats in his walls. We hear their feet scurrying back and forth above our heads. They seem to be going somewhere, urgently. There is no food in his refrigerator or cabinets. He has coffee every morning, but he doesn't own a coffee maker or grounds. Black plastic bags are filled with trash next to the oven.

Simon's bed is my favorite part of the apartment. Simon built it himself. The dark wooden frame was obviously built with the care of his wide hands. The wood is smooth and the rounded legs are steady. He has white-and-grey striped sheets and a white comforter, both smell of soap from recent washing. It's only corner of his apartment that looks cared for.

After a couple hours there, Simon got a text from one of his friends. She wanted to meet us at a nearby bar. Simon nudged me.

"Who is going to shower first?"

"You."

"Why me?"

"Because I want to lie in bed for a few more minutes."

He hopped out of bed.

"Fair enough."

Simon showered first and I showered second. While I showered, Simon took his black terrier to the backyard outside his window. She'd been wanting to go outside for awhile, lifting her head from her paws and putting it back down again.

I put on too much lipstick and rubbed some of the color off with a piece of toilet paper. Rich red streaks covered the square of tissue. I crumpled it into a ball, even-though a moment later it came undone in my hands. I couldn't find a trash can in the bathroom, only a plunger by the toilet, so I opened the cupboard below the sink. Nothing. There was a long horizontal drawer beneath the cupboard. I opened that drawer, too. No trash bag. Just a row of three opened toothbrushes.

When I came out of the bathroom, Simon was in a different mood. He complained that he had a headache and barely looked at me as we walked to the bar to meet his friend. The walk was frigid, cold seeping into the spaces between the buttons of my coat. There were empty lots covered in snow and chain-link fences fastened with padlocks. The snow on the sidewalk was either melting slush or slippery ice.

I had worn flats to the High Line, because that afternoon it was warm for the first time in weeks. Now hours later, the tops of my feet were an angry red. My arm slipped from his elbow and we walked on either side of the sidewalk to avoid the middle section covered in icy snow. I looked across the sidewalk at him and thought, "I'm in Hawaii. I'm in Hawaii and it's so warm there."

## *Warmth*

At the beach, my mother, sister and I sat with our legs in the sunshine and our faces covered by a large green-and-white beach umbrella. We were just a few feet from the ocean. Very few people were swimming. Most dipped their toes in the cold water hesitantly and quickly jumped back. Kids with dripping wet hair from the nearby pool ran in front of older people with white hair and the soft, thick brown skin of a lifelong tan. Women with stomachs pushing past their hipbones walked steadily past women with perfectly sculpted stomachs. Many of the swimsuits were bright-pink and turquoise with fringe. My sister looked over at me.

"So how are things going with Simon?"

I tucked the article I was reading under my thigh. The staple was coming apart from the first page of the print-out and my comments were smudged as they tilted upwards in the margins.

"It's still so early, I don't want to jinx anything."

"How long have you been together?"

"I'm not sure... two months?"

Susie and her fiancé are high-school sweethearts. They've been together nine years.

"Have you said 'I love you' yet?"

"No! I don't even know if we're seeing other people!"

Susie frowned, then her expression brightened.

"Well, if you want to invite him to the wedding, you can."

"Thank you, Susie. But I don't think I can do that yet."

There was a pause. My mom was looking at the sea shells she'd gathered and placed in a row on the side of her white plastic beach chair.

"Can you ask him how he feels?"

"I don't know. It might ruin everything. I think I just have to wait and see."

My mom frowned and straightened her legs out on the dark-green cushion of the beach chair. She has beautiful legs. The lean, defined muscles in her calves rest closely against her olive skin. She does not have tiny stretch marks on the outer sides of her hips, as my sister and I do. Since our weights never fluctuate more than ten pounds either way, we shouldn't have stretch marks, yet we do. I brushed my pointer finger across one of them. It stood out white even against my pale skin.

"Mom, what do I do about these?"

She shrugged.

"I don't see anything."

I decided to take a walk on the on the beach, listening to music on my phone. I like country music, because there's always a problem and a solution. The solution is usually beer or revenge, and the singer ends up on top. I walked at the edge of the water, side-stepping sandcastles and names written in the sand, "Julie+Matt Forever" outlined with a heart. The best sandcastles had parents hovering over them with orange plastic shovels.

Left to their own devices, the children didn't build steady structures. They got carried away with towers. They hadn't learned that castles need breadth as well as height. But when their towers toppled, the kids just threw sand at each other and started a game of tag. No big deal.

I was thinking about Simon. His beautiful blue eyes are rimmed in gray. I was thinking of how I put my head on Simon's shoulder the day before I left for Florida. We were sitting on the subway together. Simon was wearing a bright-blue windbreaker the color of a sky I have never seen. When I leaned against him, he flinched. I immediately pulled back.

"Is it not okay for me to put my head on your shoulder?"

Simon looked at me and his expression softened from surprise to sweetness. He nudged my shoulder with his.

"Of course you can."

I rested my head against his shoulder again. This time, Simon leaned his head back against mine.

"Look at that."

He pointed. Someone had written a message with black permanent marker on the orange subway seat. It said, "Your mother is a nice lady."

I wasn't paying attention to where my feet fell, so I almost stepped on the small silver fish that washed on the sand in front of me. Its gills and body were rising and falling, desperately smacking against the packed sand. I looked around, but no one seemed to notice. I furrowed my brows in a way that's begun to give me wrinkles in the wrong places. Fish should die from something they can't control—red tides, oil spills, even a fisherman would do—but a single fish washing up on shore doesn't make sense. Maybe it didn't swim hard enough against the tide. Maybe it fell behind, and when it couldn't see other fish, it forgot that fish must keep moving to survive.

I considered walking away, the way I walk past people asking for money on the street. I can't help everyone, so more often than not I help no one. The sunshine was bright and the

colors of bikinis and toys made the scene look innocent and harmless. Surely, the fish would be fine on its own... except I knew it would not be. Whatever spirit or strength had been absent when the fish allowed itself to be lost in a wave, had seemingly returned to it now. I looked past my red toenails to its violent flapping. Its desperate attempt to live made me think that it should.

Human beings have smaller stakes. I would not swim far enough from the shore to be drawn out by a wave, but if I did, I would expect someone to help me. Animals rarely have the luxury of rescue. If an animal's instinct fails, its life fails. But maybe not always. If this stupid fish could not ensure its own survival, I could do that much today. I put my phone down on the dry sand. My feet left shallow imprints as I walked toward the water. The ocean was just a foot away. If I could pick up the fish, I could get drop it into the water easily, but the fish wriggled its slick, shining body against my fingers and I couldn't get a steady grip.

I was afraid if I squeezed too hard, I would kill it. Desperately, I bent over and tried to push the fish along the sand toward the water. A wave picked up the fish and I tried to push and smack it farther into the water, but the wave drew back, and left it closer than it was before, but still hopelessly stranded on the sand. It was still flopping back and forth, frantically, wildly, trying to save itself. And I couldn't hold onto it. I looked around for help, but no one seemed to be paying attention. The rest of the beach moved slowly around me in the colors of flowers.

I started to walk toward a family to ask if I could borrow their plastic bucket. As I walked away, a large pelican landed quietly on the sand, tossed the fish up with its long bill, and threw back its head. The fish disappeared in an instant. It was replaced temporarily by a lump, then a rush of feathers, then nothing. I stood still and looked at the spot in the sand,



which a moment ago, had held such urgency. I felt relieved, and then I noticed there was nothing in my hands.

As I walked to get my phone with its cracked purple case and broken screen, a man stepped toward me and reached out his hand to get my attention.

"At least you kept his lunch fresh."

I was immediately embarrassed. Trying is so intimate an action. But I answered the man lightly as I walked past, with an indifferent expression it has taken me years to imitate successfully, but that I doubt I will ever fully learn.

"What else can you do?"

*Breezes*

1.

I left all the windows of my apartment open. It was an oppressively hot night in September. There was a slight breeze that blew to the bedroom through the thin white curtains of the dining room windows—but it was mostly just hot air. I plugged in the white plastic box fan by my bed. It was propped on one of the dining-room chairs. The propellers were covered in a dust that never seemed to blow off.

Will was visiting Brooklyn for one night before heading back to Santa Fe. He waited with his hands gently curved by his sides and watched me. We hadn't kissed in four years. When Will put his hands on either side of my jaw, I could feel his callouses against my cheekbones.

"You really are beautiful...You have no idea how much I missed you..."

Will never uttered these phrases when we had been together.

We broke up our sophomore year of college because I told Will I loved him and he responded, "Why are you telling me this now?" The periods of silence between sentences became achingly long. It was increasingly difficult to draw out an answer from him.

"How was your day?"

"Good."

"It was really pretty out today."

"It was."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm just really tired."

The muscles in his shoulders contracted and hardened, until the smooth, soft pale skin of his neck was no longer a place I could rest my face while he said sweet, eager things into my ear.

A few days after we broke up, Will saw me walking down one of the narrow dirt paths that runs alongside the road from our college. I was looking at the ground ahead of me, because it's easy to trip and I often do. Will slowed down his truck.

"Hey, let me drive you home."

"No, I want to walk."

"C'mon, Caitlin, let me drive you home."

After that, Will picked me up every time he saw me walking and we made awkward small talk on the rides home until it wasn't awkward anymore. Then, we started walking his boss's golden retrievers every week through a nature preserve close to campus. Near sunset everything is washed with golden light and the space hums. We talked about the things we love.

Will loves Russian literature. In one of his favorite stories, a fish falls in love with a girl's ankle, but every time the fish swims near, she jumps back. I love horses, the quiet on a horse's back, the exchange of intention. Will and I both love things that have an element of immersion, a step away from ordinary life. While we talked, the dogs ran into and out of the rushes, and unable to contain themselves, jumped all over us and left muddy footprints on our clothes.

I always worried Will's care would go away, like a sneeze, which comes on urgent and undeniable, resolves itself, then disappears. So when Will spent the night in Brooklyn, years

after we had dated in college, I felt simultaneously at ease and precarious. I turned on the fan and hesitated a moment, feeling the air blow against my hands and through my fingers, before I sat back on the bed. Will rested his forehead against mine. His lips were almost touching mine but there was enough space for him to murmur things he wasn't sure he'd say out loud.

"I love you."

"I love you back."

I paused.

"How do I know you mean that?"

"Because I'm here."

The next morning, I woke up to the sun pouring through the thin horizontal blinds and into my eyes. Will's head was pushed deep into his pillow. I got up and walked quietly across the wooden floorboards to the window. There was no one on the sidewalk yet. The cars were parked quietly on either side of the street. Next door the American flag was hanging limply, its stars looking down upon a field of red and white.

After taking a hot shower, I wrote Will directions home. My hand gripped the pen too tightly as I bent over the paper. I've never learned how to hold a pen or pencil without urgency and my letters slant upwards across the page, despite my efforts to straighten them. The note read, "I'm glad you stayed. This is how to get home. I have ice coffee in the fridge. Please help yourself." I paused for a moment and added, "I meant the things I said."

Then I scratched the sentence out, crumpled the note into a ball, and threw it into the trashcan. The trashcan's black lid swung open and then shut. I wrote a second note without adding anything to the end and crawled back into Will's arms.

"I have to go. I'm going to be late to my first day."

Will squinted open his eyes.

"Let me drive you."

As we drove away from Brooklyn, the picture outside the window got greener, lusher.

Will took my hand again. I looked out the window to the right, he looked straight.

"You know, I should really move back here."

"Wouldn't you miss Santa Fe?"

"Sure, but I belong in the Northeast, by the ocean. Somewhere like Block Island. I want to take you to Block Island. You'd love it there."

We turned onto the street leading up to my college. The street is lined with large houses, with yards full of bright yellow and green plastic playground equipment and soft pink and white blossoms that had lingered past their time on the branches of flowering trees. The windows were down and I put my right hand out the window to feel the breeze. When I was a child, I thought God was in the air, because I'd heard people say, "God is all around us." That's when I started to put my hand out the window when I was riding in cars and to run fast when I was scared. The feeling of the air against my skin gave substance to an idea.

When we got to the building, I gave Will a kiss and climbed out. But instead of driving away, he put the car in park, got out, and walked over to me. I put my arms around his neck and he put his hands in the back pockets of my shorts.

Will kissed me and looked down into my face.

I said, "I'm so glad you stayed the night."

His eyes are so soft a blue sometimes.

"I'm really glad you stayed."

2.

Six months later, I was getting lunch with my best friend, Susanna. We placed our dark, heavy winter coats on the backs of our wooden chairs and ordered soup. Each bowl came with two slices of bread, one slice white and one wheat. Susanna put her two slices on the side of my plate, reflexively. I no longer have to ask.

Will came up in conversation. Susanna looked at me carefully and put down her spoon.

"Have you heard from Will?"

Her soft blue eyes rested on me while I broke the slice of wheat bread into halves and dipped one half into the chili.

"We text a little now and then, mostly about his coming to town or me visiting Santa Fe. Why? Have you heard anything?"

"I think we should wait until after lunch to talk about it."

I loosened my grip and the piece of bread slid farther into the bowl of chili. I'd have to eat it with a spoon later.

"Is he dead?"

"No!"

"Okay, good... Is he engaged?"

I said it as a joke. Will had started dating a girl named Mia a few months after I saw him in New York. I was dating someone as well, so his relationship hadn't really concerned me. I never took it seriously.

Susanna paused.

"Mia's pregnant. They are getting married this August."

I looked at the white plate underneath my bowl of chili and pushed it to the middle of the table. I wasn't hungry anymore. I felt a cold, pulsing nervousness in my stomach.

"I need to go to the bathroom."

In the bathroom, I stood completely still in front of the mirror. My eyes are brown near the pupil, then green, then a ring of deep blue. When I cry, my eyes look more green than brown. When nothing can console me, my friends will say, "But your eyes look so pretty right now." And it takes me out of the moment long enough to laugh.

"Why else do you think I'm crying? It's not sadness, it's vanity."

And maybe it is always vanity that gets in the way. When Will and I broke up, my eyes were very green. I told my friends we broke up because Will was cold, but that was at least half a lie. I remember not being able to sleep beside him anymore, because I was trying so hard not to breathe loudly. When you start thinking about your breathing, it's hard to stop thinking about everything else. When we were first dating, I was comfortable even in silences with Will. But after awhile, I needed more reassurance. Will couldn't say out loud the words I needed to hear. Instead, he scrawled five compliments in dark-blue ink on a light-blue sheet of paper

"For when you need me to say something nice and I don't say it."

The only compliments I know by heart are, "You have beautiful brown eyes, but they are also kind" and "I like the way you snore." At the time I was disappointed in these compliments, but now I can see that he was trying. I also want clear eyes and sound sleep for the people I care about, for the people I love.

There was a soft knock on the restroom door. Susanna had paid for both our lunches and had the soups boxed up in plastic cups and bags on the table. When Susanna came into the bathroom, she immediately held out her arms. I was crying and trying not to.

"Why didn't he call?"

But I can imagine him thinking about calling, and then deciding not today, and not today, until almost everyone knew but me. That's how it goes with him. After we broke up, I began dating a photographer who took me on long night walks. While this was happening, mutual friends told me that Will would drink until his face turned an unmistakable shade of red and start shouting that he loved me. He never said anything to me about it.

Susanna and I went to her mom's apartment. It's an airy place, full of large windows. Books are artfully stacked on the tables, the air smells of fig and sandalwood, everything is filled with texture and care. All the ugliness of dirt and hard pavement is left on the soles of the shoes at the door. But I wasn't in the mood for that sort of comfort. So, we put on our jackets and climbed out the window onto her fire escape. We each lit a cigarette, a stress cigarette. I'd been having one or two a day lately, anyway.

Susanna put her hand on my knee.

"How are you doing?"

I looked across the street, into her neighbor's window. They had a large green plant with oval leaves pressed against the window.

"I don't know."

We looked down the iron bars to the street. People walk more slowly down side streets. The ones below us were looking in every window they passed.

"I don't think he would marry if he didn't love her."



Susanna sighed.

"I think it's a bad idea. But you're with Simon now. You weren't thinking about Will before this happened."

I started dating Simon four months after Will visited.

"I like Simon a lot. It's just—"

I slid my ring up and down my left fore finger. Susanna gave it to me for my birthday a year ago. I never take it off.

"I don't matter to him. I don't remember how that began with Will, but at some point it did."

"Do you love Simon?"

I rested my head on Susanna's shoulder.

"I don't know. Sometimes when I kiss him goodbye, I have the urge to say, 'Goodbye, I love you' but I don't say it and the moment passes."

*Unfinished Beach (Clouds)*

For most of my last relationship, I fell asleep as soon as my boyfriend wrapped one of his arms over my shoulders and cupped a broad hand around my elbow. Simon's sheets were a worn-soft white that I'd kick to the foot of the bed if he pulled his comforter over us. Halfway through the night, he'd pull the comforter back anyway, so he could get cold before he got warm again. His chest hair was soft against my back and his breath against my neck was inexplicably appealing, in a way that makes me believe in science. So when one of my legs cramped or I wanted to sleep on my stomach, as I do when I'm alone, I chose to stay in his arms instead.

One morning, we woke up at 4:30. Outside the windows was a forbidding black, and inside a peaceful matte darkness. When Simon squeezed me awake, I squinted my eyes open and shut them again.

"It's soooo early. Do you really want to go?"

Simon nodded, bringing his chin all the way up and all the way down to his neck, as a child does. I love this mannerism, so I sighed and pulled his arms back around me.

"Okay... in five minutes."

Some minutes later, I pushed up the light switch. Underneath it I'd Scotch Taped an index card with the Greek word, *sophrosyne*, which is commonly translated to mean "balance". I thought the word was used in a play to describe the calming of turbulent waters (later I tried to find that passage and couldn't). The actual line had been, "a dream of calm/or the wind dying."

I got coffees to warm our hands while we waited for the bus to the Far Rockaways... the “far” in front making the beach sound like a place remote even to the people who live there. My teeth were chattering and Simon slid his broad blunt fingers down the zipper of his jacket and the metal made a breaking sound. I put my hand over his, my palm feeling the bony ridges of his knuckles.

"What about you? You'd freeze."

His pale-blue eyes stilled and hardened.

"You're right."

Three kids were fidgeting near us on the sidewalk, locking and unlocking their knees. They were wearing puffy orange, electric-blue, and candy-pink down jackets that made their limbs appear twice their actual size. If you didn't know that the weight of a finger could deflate the down, the children would have looked strong and imposing. As it was, they just looked small. The oldest, maybe thirteen, was wearing pink ear buds and disinterestedly whispering for the other two to stand still. Simon inclined his head towards them.

"Do you see their mom?"

I looked around, but no one else was looking in their direction.

"No."

"You think they're alone?"

I nodded and looked down the street for the bus. He frowned and kept staring at the kids.

When the bus drove up to the curb and its doors folded in on themselves like an insect, we chose seats on the side, so Simon could lay his surfboard by our feet, and I could look out the window. The kids sat near us, facing forward. Simon smiled warmly. The vein

near his left temple bulges when he smiles, but so do the creases on the sides of his eyes, where humor has worn the tightness away.

"Are you kids going to the beach?"

The two younger children looked over shyly and nodded (their older sister looked straight ahead and continued to listen to her music). Then, the little boy spotted Simon's surfboard.

"Are you going surfing?"

Simon moved his chin all the way up and all the way down excitedly, the way I love. The younger girl looked curiously at us.

"Are you friends?"

I smiled, but I didn't know what to say. We didn't talk about each other that way, and I was afraid that if we started everything would fall apart.

"Yes, we're friends—"

Simon interrupted me.

"Best friends."

He squeezed my knee, rubbing the inside with his thumb.

"Forever!"

It's just something you say. Simon continued to talk to the kids, as he talks to everyone he meets. It occurred to me that we shouldn't talk to these children, because they shouldn't learn to chat with strangers when they are alone, but I didn't say anything, because everyone was smiling.

The kids got off the bus, waving at us from the sidewalk. We got out a few stops later and walked to the beach. It was a frigidly cold day, where everything looks white and gray,

because it's too cold to lift your chin from your neck. All the shops were closed along the beach, no lights in the windows, or bells announcing an open door. Since there was nowhere else to go, I walked to the edge of the sand with Simon and held up a towel as he changed into his wetsuit. I'd chosen a pair of black crisscross flats that I knew Simon liked and my tops of my feet were an angry red, as reds so often are. We folded his things and he picked up the long oval of his board.

"Won't you freeze in the water?"

Simon patted his suit.

"I won't feel how cold it actually is."

"Are you sure?"

Simon nodded again, gave me a kiss, and walked toward the water, his footprints taking the place of the morning walkers' shoe prints.

Three or four people were already in the ocean. The surfers' boards skimmed the surface of the waves, their torsos and arms spinning to keep balance, while somehow their feet remained still above the slick surface of the board and forward motion of the wave. Simon paddled out, pushing the water back with his forearms and finding a place in it.

I sat on a relatively dry patch of sand, wrapping my arms around myself, my hands tucked inside the sleeves of the opposite arms of my coat. The temperature did not welcome skin. I covered my feet with sand, which helped, and looked at the ocean: the ripples of movement, the frothy white at the break of a wave, and the sound that so hypnotically surrounds you. It's a beautiful thing to be able to balance on a wave, skim the surface, and arrive back where you started. But when you decide to go surfing in the winter, you can't reveal your skin or stay too long. I think we both knew where we were headed. I just should have worn different shoes.

## *Air-Conditioning*

It was cold when I heard from Stuart again. I'd asked him to stop sending text messages unless he wanted to see me, and he'd listened. For the first couple weeks, I looked for his name to pop onto the screen, I'd wanted it to, and then I stopped looking. I was in St. Louis for Thanksgiving. My parents' house heats erratically, so my bedroom was chilly during the day and hot at night. I'd just gotten out of the shower, looked at my phone, and there was his name.

I touched the screen, the pad of my pointer finger pushing into the first three letters.

"i had a dream about you last night."

I knew what he was doing, but decided to let him anyway.

"What was your dream about?"

The dots on the screen showed an ellipsis, so I knew that he was typing, and every few seconds a new line appeared in all lower-case letters, liberally punctuated.

"you were at a sink, a child was standing beside you, the water was running. you were wearing a thin tank top, and i could see the curves of your body through the fabric, and i desired you, as i always do. i don't think i could see your face, just your very pretty hair and your hands in the water."

I sat on my bed and put my phone's cracked screen face down on the covers. I got dressed in dark jeans I'd washed and dried on high heat for a tighter fit, a soft long sleeve shirt, black knit sweater, and wool socks my father bought for me because he says they won't wear out. My hair was still wet and cold drops of water were falling on my neck, below the ear.

"That sounds like a comforting dream, but if you couldn't see my face, it could have been anyone, right?"

He answered immediately, which he rarely does.

"no. i knew it was you."

I didn't write anything back. My mother called from downstairs. We were going for a walk in Forest Park. My mom wanted me to remember my scarf, because she knows I'll refuse to take hers if I forget my own, but my phone's screen lit up. Stuart.

"will you do something for me?"

"Maybe. What do you want me to do?"

"take off all of your clothes and take a photo of yourself. once with your arm covering your breasts, once without."

"I have to go out with my family. If that's still what you want in a couple of hours, I will."

"caitlin. it's what i want now. i don't care if you haven't showered or your hair is messy. i want what i said."

I met Stuart on a summer night. We went for a walk by the river. He was reserved, and he asked what I excelled in, which I thought was funny. I told him I once tried to make red velvet cake with beet juice instead of red food coloring, but the beet juice just made the batter a sickly purple, so I kept adding more and more, until the batter tasted like beets.

"But I got better, you might even say I excel ."

He nodded, cracking a small smile, and reached for my heavy purse when I shifted it from my left shoulder to my right. Later that night, we went to his apartment, which has a piano. He asked me to guess which key was middle c. I was one key off, and that seemed to

be how it would go, so I asked him to play for me instead. He sat down on the bench, and I started to stand, when he put his hand on my knee.

"You can stay."

Stuart plays beautifully. As a child, his mother made him practice two hours a day. He wanted to play basketball, but only after college did he get to skip his Saturday piano lesson and run after a ball.

Stuart's room had framed paintings and a large bed with white sheets and a white comforter. In the night, he'd press me in close with his right palm, or if he turned, grab my leg and pull it over his side. His movements were all definite and assured in a way his thin voice was not, insisting without question. The air-conditioner was on, so the room was almost cold. The summer had been mild, so I usually slept with the windows open. The loud hum of his air-conditioner kept me up thinking and pretending to sleep.

In the morning, I woke up first. Stuart's bathroom was empty, two sinks but barely more than a toothbrush and a bar of soap. When I came back into his bedroom, he was facing the window, his thick curly hair spread against the white cotton pillow case. I ran my fingers through it and he turned toward me. I got in bed facing him. The fall semester of graduate school had not started yet, but he had to go to work.

"I should go, so you can work."

He squinted his eyes and said something I couldn't quite hear.

"What?"

He asked me to say things and I said those things. When I stepped off the bed, he grabbed the arch of my foot and pulled me back.



As long as it was warm, I assumed I'd see Stuart again. He texted every four or five days to see how I was, ask me questions, say hello, but not make any definite plans. I'd ask Stuart to get a drink. He'd say he liked drinks. I'd ask if he wanted to get drinks tonight. He'd say it was a pretty night, tonight. Eventually, I got tired of asking.

"What do you want? I don't know what you want from me."

I thought maybe Stuart just wanted to be friends.

"i want you to beg."

I got texts, sometimes in the morning, sometimes late at night and the summer extended into fall. Nothing changed. Everyone said we were being rewarded for last winter's bitter cold. The fear was that the warmth would give way to another cold winter, but I didn't believe it until I had been wearing hooded vests under my down jacket for weeks.

I asked Stuart to stop texting unless he wanted to see me.

He wrote, "i'm sure we'll figure out something one of these nights."

Occasionally, I get a text asking me to say things he wants to hear. It's hard to resist someone so handsome and wealthy and successful, someone who has the luxury and arrogance to play a piano late at night in Manhattan. So, I go along with it and sometimes I even believe I'll see him again. I had a dream about Stuart recently. It was a sunny day, a white day. I was headed to the beach. As I opened the screen door, Stuart pulled my arm back and rubbed in a spot of sunscreen I had missed right above my elbow. His thumb pressed the spot and I looked back at him.

"Are you coming?"

I think he answered in the dream, but I woke up with no memory of a reply. I just turned off my phone's alarm and went back to sleep.

## *Towards*

Susannah and I went for a walk towards a nearby pier on a placidly cold afternoon in the last days of March. I don't understand March in New York. Although the month is supposed to begin a long thaw, it contains some of the bitterest weather of the year. Everyone is hesitant to leave their coats and scarves at home, even on mild days. As I tucked my hands into the generous pocket of my wool coat, I couldn't help thinking how much nicer walks will be this spring, when the flowers by the side of the concrete remind me of something else.

We passed a few storefront windows, then Susannah paused.

"Do you mind if we stop at this one?"

We pulled open the heavy doors. They were made of glass, but had iron frames and handles. Inside the store, soft green succulent plants in small clay pots were placed next to delicate gold necklaces cut into imprecise shapes. The circles were not perfectly round, the edges of squares leaned in or out of line...such elegantly reconstructed error. Susannah lifted the lid of a candle, it was meant to smell like atlas sage and cedar, but the combination diminished each of them.

"Wow, that's strong."

She placed the candle down and looked over to me.

How is the one you tried?"

I'd picked up a rose and sandalwood version.

"A little better."

Susannah's home always smells wonderfully. Gradually scents and textures have become more important to me. My sensibility started to change when a boyfriend left

stargazer lilies at my door. The flower's name appealed to me, but the spiky shape and pink and purple centers of its white tapered petals did not. He told me to remove the pollen, so the flowers would last longer—and for over a week the gentle scent of lilies drifted from their place in my window and filled the room. They've been my favorite flower ever since.

Susannah and I see each other at least once a week. We usually talk about relationships, because they are one of the few things we can't take care of by ourselves. This time I had been seeing a guy, Paul, for a month and was worried he was seeing other women.

"There are just so many options."

"But if you think about how many people we really like and are interested in dating, there aren't that many."

Susannah was flipping through posters. The one she lingered on had a red circle surrounded by small horizontal blue lines. A red moon over the sea? It could be anything. She took a photo of the poster with her phone and walked to a hanging rack of linen shirts.

"Do you think I should bring up seeing other people?"

"If Paul said he wasn't ready, would you still want to go out with him?"

"Probably not."

"Then if you really like him, maybe you should wait."

"I don't want to ask. I just feel uncomfortable not knowing. With Simon, I was always moving things forward. I don't want to do that again."

"I think that's completely reasonable, as long as you are okay with the uncertainty."

Susannah leaned in to smell another candle, Blooms in Lanai.

"Too sweet."

We wandered around the store, and I tried on a beige sunhat. My face is easily burnt and I hate sunscreen, but I like to wear hats tilted upward, so brims don't diminish the light anyway. Susannah was looking at some simple shift dresses that you can pull over your head and be done with. The dresses are easy to wear, but they don't show the outlines of a woman's body. No good for dates. She'd recently started seeing someone as well.

"Timing is important. We've only been on two dates, but he's already told me he's not seeing anyone else. It's hard for them, I think. Too soon is just as bad as too late."

I put the beige hat back on the table with the others.

"I think too late might be worse, because you only stick around that long if you like someone. There are no stakes if you don't care how it turns out."

I put on a black sunhat and asked Susannah which she preferred.

"The beige one will look better when it's warm, but who knows when that will be. The black hat can go either way. I think you should get both."

I ended up choosing neither, and Susannah bought a candle with a scent so noninvasive that I can no longer remember it.

When we reached the pier, a strong breeze off the water made Susannah and I turn our faces to the side, but the wind subsided after a moment, and we sat down on a wooden bench facing Manhattan. The buildings have been described as frozen music, and the strangeness of that description feels appropriate. What is frozen music? And why do people build structures that make them feel small? I took a white and blue pack of cigarettes from my pocket and we each took one. Susannah was talking about her recent date.

"We've only seen each other twice, but I already feel so much pressure. He called me 'babe' in his last text and keeps sending messages."

"A girl could never get away with that."

We have similar conversations whenever we are dating at the same time. In relationships, in the most general terms, I'm attracted to men who are emotionally unreachable, she's attracted to men who are emotionally demanding. Each have their own set of difficulties. I was afraid Paul might be no different from the others, but who knows? He had recently acted in a short film about a guy who uses kitchen cutlery and his girlfriend's sunglasses to create a device that allows him to see five seconds into the future—the problem is that five seconds isn't enough time to change anything.

"I hate when I don't know where something is going."

"Everyone does, but you have to just sit with it sometimes."

The East River Ferry arrived and a few people got off the ramp, their hair blown over their faces, and a man who had been lingering by the large standing-map walked past them towards the boat.

Susannah and I stubbed out our cigarettes and threw them into the metal trash can by the side of the bench. Neither of us are steady smokers, but now and then we favor Parliaments, which are lighter than American Spirits and burn faster. Most of the time, I don't even inhale the smoke. Susannah took my elbow as we walked away from the water.

"I love you, but I also know you. At the beginning of a relationship—my mom uses this image—you have to wear a wetsuit, and just let the emotions and fears slide off."

We always arrive back at this problem. I know she is right, but I like to feel the water on my skin. We were walking back in the direction of the train but there was no real hurry.

“Do you want to get frozen yogurt?”

She smiled.

“That’s the best idea I’ve ever heard.”