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## Patsy Sings For Me: Stories

Brenna Elizabeth Womer

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**PATSY SINGS FOR ME:  
STORIES**

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of  
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Brenna Womer

May 2016

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## **PATSY SINGS FOR ME: STORIES**

English

Missouri State University, April 2016

Master of Arts

Brenna Womer

### **ABSTRACT**

This thesis begins with a critical introduction about the function of place in works of fiction and creative nonfiction. I use quotes from Joan Didion, Flannery O'Connor, Dorothy Allison, and others to support the idea that, though many hold to the belief that people are shaped by place, really it is people who prescribe meaning to landscape and location, not the other way around. Place is at the mercy of memory and language. After the critical introduction, you will find short stories, flash fiction, essay, short memoir, and flash nonfiction. These works were not written with a specific theme in mind, but the strongest thread throughout is certainly a sense of place and accompanying culture, particularly in my memoir piece, "Empire Blue," which explores my parents' relationship, its effects on me as a child moving from one military base to the next, and my reflections on those effects now.

**KEYWORDS:** place in fiction, place in creative nonfiction, sense of place, identity and place, childhood

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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Jennifer Murvin, MFA  
Chairperson, Advisory Committee  
Missouri State University

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Approved:

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Jennifer Murvin, MFA

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I would like to thank my Thesis Chair Jennifer Murvin, who tells it like it is, but always with grace and kindness, and who never fails to know exactly which book to recommend. I'd like to thank Michael Czyzniejewski for welcoming me into the writing community and for being a patient and dedicated mentor at such a crucial, formative time in my life as a writer. I also give my thanks to Dr. Matthew Calihman, as a professor, for cultivating an atmosphere and a discourse in the classroom that was, as a freshman literature student, everything I had hoped college would be, and, as an advisor, for listening to me at 18 years old describe to him what it was I wanted to write, and saying, "That sounds like creative nonfiction."

I dedicate this thesis to Dr. Jane Hoogestraat, the professor who wanted lemon cake.

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## MADE IN HER IMAGE: PLACE IN FICTION & CREATIVE NONFICTION

“A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his image.”

Joan Didion, *The White Album*

It is not an uncommon notion that a person is shaped by her environment, by the place she was raised, where she has traveled, and where she presently resides. In his essay, “Why I Live Where I Live,” Georgia native Harry Crews says of the swamp where he spent time with his cousin’s husband, “TJ made his living out of the swamp, and I make mine now out of how the swamp shaped me, how the rhythms and patterns of speech in that time are still alive in my mouth today.” He goes on to say that no matter where he is or what he is working on, he believes everything he writes is influenced by what happened to him growing up in South Georgia (Crews 46-47). However, memoirist Joan Didion suggests that we, as writers and rememberers, give meaning to a place and not the other way around—that place is at the mercy of memory and language, and while a writer may not have a say in landscape or dialect, climate or culture, it is up to her to interpret and prescribe meaning to the characteristics of any given place. Flannery O’Connor says in her book *Wise Blood*, “Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to was never there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. Where is there a place for you to be? No place... Nothing outside you can give you any place... In yourself right now is all the place you've got.”

Didion and O’Conner team up on this point—“place” is nebulous. There may be fixed coordinates, geographical features, and a road that will lead you back should you choose to return, but all significance, all definition, lives within the writer herself. Didion



says, “Kilimanjaro belongs to Ernest Hemingway. Oxford, Mississippi, belongs to William Faulkner... a great deal of Honolulu has always belonged for me to James Jones,” (qtd. in Kakutani) and, according to Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times*, “California belongs to Joan Didion.” Fiction writers manipulate place for the sake of character development, as a mirror or a foil, and to establish the tone of the piece, to set the mood. Writers of creative nonfiction manipulate place in much the same way—to contrast, compliment, or complicate the players in a given work and to orient the reader as to atmosphere and tone. A writer holds the power to own a place and also to choose how she allows it to define her.

Perhaps the idea of shaping place is one I take to readily because I grew up on military bases, never living in one spot for more than a few years. Even before I could pronounce it correctly, the word “uniform” was a part of my everyday vocabulary. No matter where in the world we were, my father wore the same starched camouflage to work each morning, and every house was identical to the ones on either side of it. The national anthem stopped traffic every evening at five o’clock, and “Taps” played us to sleep at ten o’clock on the dot. Scenery, climate, and community—even the presence of my father, who would deploy for six months at a time—were not consistent during my childhood. While many feel rooted in the place they grew up, feel they carry those coordinates with them wherever they go, as Harry Crews said he did, I feel I have allowed my own childhood to be defined more by a lack of place than by any of the places we resided during my first 18 years. To this day, I hesitate when someone asks me where I am from, and, inevitably, I end up saying the place where I was born because, “I’m not from anywhere,” has rarely proven to be a satisfactory answer for the person

inquiring. In my experience, people are not comfortable with placelessness, but I think that lack of loyalty to a place has benefited my writing and allows me to prescribe meaning without being so heavily influenced by those intrinsic biases that often accompany being “from” somewhere.

In his essay “Writing in Place: The New American Regionalism,” Michael Kowalewski discusses the evolution of and shift in attitude toward regionalism in contemporary American literature. Kowalewski makes reference to Barry Lopez’s notion of “false geographies,” which he says refers “to a congeries of romantic preconceptions by means of which the ‘essential wildness’ and ‘almost incomprehensible depth and complexity’ of the American landscape have been reduced to ‘attractive scenery’” (173). In a story I originally intended to include in my thesis, it was pointed out to me by my advisor that I had exoticized one of the main characters—a beautiful Latina woman who functioned within the story to give more depth and complexity to the plot but without any true exploration of those complexities. I was unwittingly relying on the preconceptions and stereotypes of a culture to give definition to my character. In the same way, writers often rely on what their readers already associate with a place to do the work of deepening and complicating the text. Barry Lopez also coined the term “memorized landscape,” which is a landscape that is “visually memorized before it has been actually experienced” (qtd. in Kowalewski 173). This, Kowalewski suggests, is unfortunate because “certain critical categories now seem ‘memorized’ ahead of time such that their premises frequently dictate many of their conclusions” (173).

In thinking about Kowalewski’s and Lopez’s assertions about place and regionalism, I go back to the Didion quote with which this paper began: “A place belongs

forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his image.” It is not to say that relying on prescribed meaning of a place to complicate a story or essay is necessarily wrong, but it might be fair to say it lacks originality, oftentimes rendering the work forgettable; it might be fair, if not a bit harsh as well, to call a reliance on “memorized landscape” lazy. Please note, I think a distinction should be made between a writer’s reliance on the stereotypes and understood symbols and culture of a particular locale to paint a picture or elicit emotion from a reader—memorized landscape—and a writer doing the work of taking something commonplace and wrenching it into something less familiar to challenge reader perception—defamiliarization.

There has been a shift, an internalization of place, as travel and education have become more accessible, and the place or places one was raised are not necessarily indicative of where a person will end up. Whether or not Kowalewski intended to highlight this, he does when he says:

One of the central impulses in American literature—one shared by H. D. Thoreau and Willa Cather, William Faulkner and Leslie Marmon Silko, Wallace Stevens and Joan Didion, Zora Neale Hurston and Arturo Islas—has been to evoke what Frederick Turner (echoing D. H. Lawrence) calls a ‘spirit of place.’ (174)

The use of the word “spirit” is notable here. The spirit of the land is not an unheard of phrase, but I would argue that the spirit of the land does not spring forth from the land itself but rather from the people of that land. It is made in their image, as Didion says, and not the other way around. Thoreau and Cather give meaning to the land through their ruminations and reflections on it, their intimacy with it. In a particular passage from *My Ántonia*, Cather describes the migration of Mormon’s west from Missouri to Utah as they

fled religious persecution. The men traveled first and planted sunflower seeds along the road for the women and children to follow. As a young man, the narrator, Jim Burden, hears this tale and forever associates the Missouri roads lined with sunflowers with freedom. Those roads do not in themselves possess a spirit of freedom, but, rather, the people of that land bestowed the spirit upon the roads and flowers.

In discussing the preservation of historical landmarks and geographical features, Tony Hiss says that people in favor of and lobbying for preservation do not focus solely on the “architectural beauty” of the place, but the character “or its essential spirit, or the quality of life there, or of its livability, genius, flavor, feeling, ambience, essence, resonance, presence, aura, harmony, grace, charm, or seamliness,” which attempt “to convey some specific component of an experience”—some past experience of their own in a given place that they wish others to experience as well (qtd. in Kowalewski 179). Place is crafted by culture, and when we travel to a specific location, our experience and definition of it is determined by the culture already present there and by the one we bring with us. It is interesting to me the connection Hiss makes between lobbyists for preservation and their positive past experiences in a given place, as though preserving the tangible, architectural aspects of a place could somehow also preserve those personal, spiritual, intangible experiences for future generations. According to Kowalewski, “Cognitive scientists are now suggesting that memory itself cannot function without place, that we can have no awareness of past events in our lives ‘without a sense of the place in which they happened’” (174). This suggests that it is, in fact, humans who prescribe meaning to place. When we experience something pleasant, when we are challenged intellectually or spiritually to grow, when we see something or meet someone

stimulating and wish for others to be able to experience the same, we often associate it with our physical location at the time. And so Missouri roads lined with sunflowers represent freedom for Cather's Jim Burden, who is narrating the story from adulthood as a man who left Missouri to pursue higher education. In *The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner parallels the deterioration of southern aristocracy with the deterioration of a prominent southern family. Kowalewski quotes Eudora Welty, from her essay "Place in Fiction," as saying, "Location is the ground conductor of all the currents of emotion and belief and moral conviction that charge out from the story in its course" (175).

When I think of place in contemporary literature, I think of Dorothy Allison. A majority of her short stories and her novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* take place in small-town South Carolina where Allison herself was born and raised by a single mom who worked as a waitress (*Dorothy Allison*). Allison's stories are dark, often revolving around a young girl in an impoverished, incestuous, violent southern family; in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, we are carried through the novel by first-person narrator Ruth Anne "Bone" Boatwright. Her stories are unsettling, causing a discomfort not uncommon among dirty realist texts, and there is no lack of description of the physical environment or landscape. While reading, one can almost feel the heat and smell the dirt, taste the whiskey on her uncles' breath. In a craft talk entitled "Place," which Allison wrote for *Tin House*, she gives insight into her thoughts on the function of place within a text. Beginning with what is perhaps the most succinct definition of place I have come across, Allison says: "Place is people. Place is people with self-consciousness. Place is people with desire." She also says:

Place is not just what your feet are crossing to get to somewhere. Place is feeling, and feeling is something a character expresses... if you tell me the

lawn is manicured but don't tell me that it makes your character both deeply happy and slightly anxious—then I'm a little bit frustrated with you. (Allison)

Place is not physical landscape or architecture or dialect—place is a person's spiritual and emotional response to a physical location; place is what a person sees of themselves and others in the landscape. For Allison, "Place is emotion," and a story that is happening in a real place means a "place that has meaning and that evokes emotions in the person who's telling [her] the story" (Allison).

One of the most frustrating scenarios, according to Allison, is reading a story that "seems to take place in no place." In fiction, she acknowledges that many writers must invent the place they are writing about because of our dissolving roots as American citizens: "Most Americans no longer have the history of growing up in a town where their parents grew up and their grandparents grew up and handed down stories about what came before" (Allison). She also says that a sense of place is what readers desire most from writers, but is the thing writers are most likely to devalue, dismiss, or ignore because of their familiarity with it. This notion in particular translates very well to the field of creative nonfiction. Because place comes from within—is the manifestation of a person's emotion and desire—it seems an essential aspect of the genre. Though fiction writers often rely heavily on place to set the tone of their stories and provide background and definition for their characters, it could be said that place should be an even stronger element in creative nonfiction because of the veil lifted between the author and reader; with the guise of fiction removed, the self takes center stage. Going back to O'Conner, "Nothing outside you can give you any place... In yourself right now is all the place you've got," the sense of place in creative nonfiction seems destined to be a stronger

element because the reader is allowed steps closer to the author's self, which, according to O'Connor and Allison, is where place resides.

In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott details her own writing process and how she goes about teaching creative writing to her students. In the first chapter of the book she says when her students ask her *how* to write, she tells them to simply sit down and do it. She goes on to describe the inevitable fidgeting and restlessness, but says, eventually, “with your fingers poised on the keyboard, you squint at an image that is forming in your mind—a scene, a locale... and you try to quiet your mind so you can hear what that landscape... has to say above the other voices” (6-7). When Lamott says one must listen to the voice of the landscape, which, at the writer's desk, is only the memory of the scene, what she is really saying is that one must listen to the self's interpretation of the landscape; he or she must mine for the truth they found in the place they are conjuring. Lamott says the first thing she tells her students on the first day of workshop is that “good writing is about telling the truth” (3). With that truth, the goal is to make the reader pay attention to their world, which is something Lamott asserts is a great gift of the author (15). Even if the place being described by the author is not what the reader sees out his or her window, if done well, the writer, with their truth, is able help the reader better interpret their own landscape.

Junot Diaz, in his short story collection *This is How You Lose Her*, utilizes place in a unique way that very much supports Flannery O'Connor's assertion that inside of a person is the only place they have. Diaz wastes no time establishing his main character, Yunion—whom he carries throughout this particular collection—as a Dominican-American young man. There is a strong sense of place in these stories, but while Yunion

mostly finds himself in the ghettos of larger American cities like Chicago, the influence of Dominican culture is always present. Wherever we go with Yuni6r is Dominican American because the spirits of the two cultures are constantly at war within him. Yuni6r is a sympathetic, frustrating character. He wants to be a good man, but throughout these stories, from the first pages even, he plays the martyr to a nature that was expected amongst the men from his home country. Yuni6r says of his girlfriend, Magdalena, in “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars,” that she considers him to be “a typical Dominican man: a sucio, an asshole” (Diaz 3). This warring of cultures within the text—where culture is less about language and folklore and more about gender roles, pride, and rules of conduct—the juxtaposition of Dominican and American ideals, is what outlines and colors the sense of place for the reader, and all this is established through Yuni6r’s first-person narration—his emotions and desires and the interaction between characters—more than any physical feature of the landscape.

Memoirist Jo Ann Beard, in her essay collection *The Boys of My Youth*, specifically in the essay “Cousins,” masterfully establishes a sense of place from the first paragraph with descriptions of the lake where her mother and aunt fish before they each know they are pregnant—“the skin of the lake twitches suddenly and a fish springs loose into the air”—and the corn on the sides of the road Beard and her cousin navigate in an old Firebird—“the corn gathers its strength, grows an inch in the silence, then stops to rest” (17). Beard describes shirts printed with little cowboys and women wearing baseball caps to escape the summer sun. “We want to go out with guys who wear boots with turned-up toes and worn-down heels,” she says. “We’re out in the country, on my cousin’s turf” (18). And while these descriptions do paint a picture of the landscape and



culture for the reader, when Beard references landscape by name, it is not in reference to the land itself, it is in reference to the memory of her cousin's hair—"When she wakes up in the morning her head is like a landscape, with cliffs and valleys, spectacular pinnacles" (18). The spirit of this place is defined for Beard by stories of her mother and aunt on that lake fishing, while she and her cousin were "floating in separate, saline oceans" (16). Though Beard, too, is from this patch of country, she calls it her cousin's turf, and, in describing her cousin's hair as a landscape, reveals that this place, for her, is not defined so much by the skin of the lake or cowboy boots or sleeping corn, but by the people who reside there—the memories she has and the ones that have been described to her.

Dorothy Allison says in her craft essay that she aches to know the secrets of others, "especially their secret places." As writers, when we give the reader a sense of place, when we wrench meaning from the landscape, as Joan Didion would say, we inevitably share with them our secrets. Jo Ann Beard describes the lake, but the landscape is not significant in and of itself. Rather, the scenery is significant because of the parallel drawn between the waters on which Beard's mother and aunt are fishing and the waters inside these women, where she and her cousin are floating in secret. When Beard describes that lake, that memory of her mother and aunt, she is sharing one of those secret places for which Allison—and all readers, she asserts—is thirsty. Because the only place we have is within us, because the spirit of the land is determined by the spirit of the people who reside there, is malleable and at the mercy of the mindset and culture of the person experiencing the landscape, when we give our readers a sense of place, what we are really doing is sharing our secrets with them, showing them, as Mary Austin would say, the "guts" of our art (qtd. in Kowalewski 171). In my memoir piece, "Empire Blue,"

I move base by base to paint a picture of my childhood and my parents' relationship. In England, from the inside of a butterfly bush at age seven, I reflect on my mother's depression; and at the base pool in Oklahoma, I color the shame I learned for my own body at the age of ten. On the coast of Virginia, my mother and I free one of two seagulls hooked on the same fishing lure, and, as she is tossing the second one, the lost cause, onto the rocks, her wedding ring catches the sunlight, and I understand, at age twelve, that I need to be the gull who got away.

## FICTION

### **Just Like Mama Never Made**

Eleanor was looking for lemons, but stopped to stare at the bald ears of corn, three to a package, in the produce aisle. The thought of a machine tearing at their husks and silk rattled her, left her wishing she had been the one to strip them bare of their papery skins, their golden strands like tufts of baby hair. She pushed past them, unsettled. The lemons were for lemonade and the lemonade was for the boy who would be coming to mow her lawn the following afternoon. She had seen a handmade sign a few neighborhoods over—sloppy, block letters, a backward Y beginning "yardwork" with a phone number underneath—and thought it would be nice to help the kid make a little extra money during the summer.

Eleanor was thirty-seven and hated the way cut grass stuck to wet feet. When she was uncomfortable—caught in a lie, having her nails filed, picking cut grass off her wet feet—she bit the inside of her cheek until she drew blood. Her parents lived across town and she saw them a couple times a week for dinner and the occasional lunch, always some combination of pasta and sauce. They'd started to smell different, her parents. It was their breath mostly, like mold or mildew; like they were rotting from the inside out. She had her mother's thin, flat hair and slender calves and nothing of her father's. Growing up, people asked if he was her real father and she always answered, "I think so," with a shrug. It's not like she'd be the one to know.

At the slanted baskets of green and yellow citrus, the lemons were hard as rocks, even the ones at the very bottom. She'd heard you could microwave them to get the juices flowing but Eleanor didn't like microwaves. She didn't like microwaves the way she

didn't like artificial sweeteners and aerosol sprays and walking through library book detectors. She chose one of the prepackaged bags of lemons instead and left it up to chance. She wanted the little boy to have lemonade in a Tom Collins glass filled with ice, a striped straw resting against a little half-moon of lemon on the rim. When she called the number on the sign earlier that morning, a woman whom she assumed was the boy's mother answered and said Tommy couldn't come to the phone, but she was sure he was free the next day at two o'clock.

"He'll be so excited!" she said. "You're the first to call from those signs I told him he should make. He wasn't sure they were gonna work."

"Well, I thought they were adorable," said Eleanor. "Tomorrow at two then?"

"Oh lord, I won't tell him you said they're adorable. That'll really get his undies in a bunch," the woman said, and laughed. "He'll be there! What's your address?"

Eleanor gave the woman her address and hung up the phone. She thought she and the woman must have been about the same age. She had no good reason for thinking it, except that she was middle-aged; there were lots of people stuck in the middle with her. The only difference was that most of them had families—spouses, children, nieces and nephews. Eleanor was an only child. Her parents never intended to have children and after she was born they certainly didn't intend to have any more, so her father had a vasectomy. These were the kinds of details her mother offered freely as the anesthesia wore off after a colonoscopy and on Christmas Eve as Eleanor's father uncorked a second bottle of Cabernet and the needles of the fiber optic Christmas tree changed from red to blue to green. The boy coming to mow the lawn—Tommy—he could easily be Eleanor's son had things turned out differently.

Eleanor grabbed a bag of Granny Smith apples. It had been ages since she baked a pie. Her parents were both Type 2 diabetics and she didn't like to tempt them by taking over desserts. Having someone to make food for was what Eleanor missed most about being in love. She had met her last boyfriend, Nick, at her parents' church on Easter Sunday, one of only two days a year they could get her to attend. She made a peach pie for the potluck after service, because even if she didn't want to be there it was at least an excuse to bake something. The congregation was very small so there was little guesswork as to who brought what. As she wallflowered and sipped stale Folgers from a Styrofoam cup while her parents mingled, Nick slid into the space next to her, a generous slice on his plate, and said with a full mouth, "This is by far the *worst* pie I've ever had." He took another bite while still chewing the last one and smiled.

Tommy would want a slice of apple pie when he finished mowing, and if he worried his mother would get after him for spoiling his dinner he could just take the whole thing home with him. She liked the idea of the little family bringing out her dessert after the kids cleared the table, enjoying a slice each with glasses of milk, and coffee for Mom and Dad. Just as Eleanor loaded the last of her items onto the conveyer belt, her mother called to ask if she wanted to come over for a noon lunch the next day, and, if she did, would she mind grabbing a jar of Newman's Own Alfredo. The old woman at checkout had been rummaging through a plastic container of unorganized coupons for about five minutes and was still doing so when Eleanor returned with the sauce. On her way home, she drove by Tommy's sign and imagined him stapling it in place, his bike leaning against the telephone pole, the strap of a black and neon helmet pulled tight under his chin by a cautious mother before he left the house. She was anxious to meet him, to

feed him and maybe hear a bit about his life. She so easily could have been the one Tommy came home to after school and told about his day while dunking a freshly baked cookie into a glass of two-percent milk. She could feel the potential of her almost-life like melted chocolate burning the roof of her mouth, like dried batter on a spoon she forgot to rinse.

She and Nick were together for almost three years, but he was ready to move in together after eight months. Each time he suggested it, Eleanor thought of his dirty socks in the wash with her delicates, his pubic hair stuck to the bar of soap in the shower, the slapdash way he loaded the dishwasher, and asked if they couldn't wait just a little bit longer. He left her for another woman. It seemed the things he found endearing about her in the beginning—her introversion, her fearfulness, her need to keep all the foods on her plate from touching each other—they charmed him, until they made him grit his teeth. She often wondered if they *had* moved in together, if his patience would have been fortified in some way, or if the end would have come that much quicker.

In the last handful of months they had together she could tell he wasn't happy, could tell she was losing—had probably already lost—his love, but it wasn't in his kiss the way the old song said. She could tell by the way he stopped wanting her to be right about anything at all; how he stopped apologizing when his contradictions and corrections proved to be wrong, but seemed just as unsatisfied when they turned out to be right. She knew the end was coming, like the last railroad car at the end of a long train. At home Eleanor unloaded the groceries and arranged the lemons in a crystal bowl. She kept her home cool, too cool for most people. When fall arrived she would open her windows and keep them open into the wintertime, progressively adding more layers to

her wardrobe—long underwear and oversized sweaters, double layers of socks, fingerless gloves, and then mittens when she thought the blood in her fingers had started to run too thick. But one night a heavy snow would fall and she'd emerge from under her electric blankets in the morning, and, seeing the snow closing in from the windowsills, have to remind herself that she was human and should probably act like it. She would shut the windows until spring.

Eleanor set the alfredo by the door so she wouldn't forget it the next day, and then started the pie dough. Her extended family had a hard time understanding how she, the daughter of a woman they liked to say could "burn water," ended up with an affinity for all things kitchen related. It made it easy on everyone around holidays and birthdays; she had rubber spatulas of every brand and color, whisks of every size, at least two-dozen aprons (even though she never baked in anything but one of Nick's old button-up shirts), cookie cutters for every season and in the shape of nearly every post-Cretaceous creature to be thought of, and bowls, so many bowls. They were her favorite, just waiting to be filled.

It had been almost a year since Nick left. She had read once in a magazine that it took the average person half the time they were with someone to get over them, meaning she had six more months or else risked missing yet another opportunity to par the public course. It took a while for Eleanor to tell her parents when she and Nick had split. She generated a month of excuses for why Nick hadn't been coming to their dinners, why she looked so tired all the time, why her hands shook as she passed the crescent rolls, before finally telling them they were never *ever* going to be grandparents. Which was not at all what she had actually said, but was the only thing they took away from her explanation,

of that she was certain. She did want to be a mother someday, but at her age that's not what anybody wanted to hear—"someday." It was now or never and no one was too shy to tell her so.

She kneaded the dough into two balls and thought of tiny clenched fists, of translucent skin and tongues like pink slugs. She dusted one lump with flour so the pin wouldn't stick and rolled it out flat for the pie crust, brushed her hand across the surface, soft and smooth as a baby's cheek. She took up the dough sheet in both hands and laid it in the Pyrex plate with care, pressing it into the corners before setting it aside to make the filling. She wondered if Tommy was a kind boy, the type to defend the scrawnier kid in the hallway who was being bullied out of his Zebra Cakes. She wondered if he had ever cheated or helped someone cheat; if he had a crush or maybe even a girlfriend; if he still let his father read to him before bed. She imagined Nick sitting up against a red, metal headboard in the boy's room, still in his work clothes after a long day. She would pull off his loafers as he began to read aloud from her yellowing copy of *The Phantom Tollbooth*. Tommy would fall asleep halfway through the chapter, having had a long day too, mowing lawns in that heat. She was so proud of him.

Eleanor cradled the raw pie in her hands and tucked it carefully into the oven, and after she shut the door her life felt slightly less abridged. That night as she went to sleep she thought of her guest room, imagined it painted blue and decorated with *Star Wars* posters, model airplanes, and a red twin bed with dinosaur sheets. She thought of two-person breakfasts and brown paper bags, checking for brushed teeth and clean socks, and pushing back shaggy hair to kiss the face of her reluctant boy, growing up too fast.



Before she left for lunch the next day, Eleanor checked the cooled pie on the stovetop, which had settled into a comfortable, glossy mass. She set all the ingredients for lemonade out on the counter so she could make it as soon as she got home, just in time to see Tommy pushing his mower up the driveway. She pulled sunscreen from the bathroom closet in case he forgot to put it on at home.

She put the sauce in her bag and when she got to her parents' house they were sitting on the porch, waving to each car as it passed whether the driver saw them or not. Her father had wedged himself into the wicker chair, his stomach and hips, indistinguishable one from the other, puffed out from the holes beneath the chair's arms. His smile to Eleanor was toothy and warm and she had the urge to sit on his lap, to loll her legs over the side of the chair and rest her head against his chest. But that hadn't been acceptable in decades, not since she hit puberty and her father started enforcing a gap between their chests when they hugged. Her mother's middle was similarly ample, but she sat on the porch swing which was more forgiving of girth, though Eleanor still worried for the chains as they strained beneath sky-blue soffit. Her parents had been adamant about the color, insisting it was scientifically proven to ward off mosquitoes, but they still kept a can of bug spray in the empty planter by the door. Neither of them rose to greet her, letting her come to them. She leaned down to kiss her father on the cheek and, as she did so, received a few ham-handed pats on the back. Her mother drummed fingers on the cushion next to her indicating she should sit, but Eleanor, not wishing to tempt fate or challenge gravity, said she felt like standing.

"You're so particular," her mother said as she smoothed the pleats of her floral skirt. "Did you remember the sauce?"

Eleanor reached into her book bag, pulled out the jar, and handed it to her mother.

"Isn't he just so handsome?" she asked, rotating the jar to show the sketch of Paul Newman's face, the red ascot around his neck. "A silver fox, I think you'd call him."

Her father rolled his eyes, scratched his stomach, or his hip; she wasn't sure which. Through the porch window she could see steam billowing out of a pot on the stove in the kitchen.

"I think your water's boiling, Mama," she said, pointing toward the glass. Her mother let out a string of curses and worked to propel herself out of the swing.

"I have a neighbor boy coming to mow the lawn at two, so I can only stay an hour or so," Eleanor said. "I hope that's all right."

"I swear, Eleanor. You've lived alone this long, why don't you just mow the damn thing yourself," her mother said, voice trailing as the screen door clapped closed behind her. "And buy a proper purse, would you!" she hollered from the kitchen.

"She means well," her father said, smiling and shaking his head. "And she's glad you're here. Now help an old man up, would you?"

They had a nice lunch, if not a bit heavy with its cream sauce and buttered Wonder Bread slices and glasses of syrupy sweet tea. Eleanor cleared the table and did the dishes because it was a rule in their house that the cook never cleaned. Her parents saw her out, taking up their previous spots on the porch; she left them just as she'd found them, waving their plump fingers at the windshield. It was 1:15, which was later than she had wanted to leave, but her mother always took her sweet time putting together a Tupperware of leftovers for Eleanor to take with her. Still, she had plenty of time to get home and start with the lemons, or would have, had she not rear-ended someone at a

stoplight as she searched her phone for the ideal sugar-to-water-to-lemon ratio. She jolted forward against the locked seatbelt as her fender made contact with the car in front, phone flying out of her hand and landing on the passenger-side floor mat, the happy yellow of a Meyer lemon emanating from the screen.

It was 1:56 when a police officer finally pulled up on his motorcycle, apologizing for the delay. Eleanor thought of Tommy, punctual and eager, standing on her stoop, tapping on the screen door a few times before ringing the doorbell. After a few minutes of tapping and ringing and squinting through her front window, he would give up and push his mower back home, confused and disappointed, feeling cheated. She thought of fresh apple pie and future lemonade and all the latent potential of her guest room, of her life.

It was 4:30 by the time Eleanor got home, and as she pulled up in the rental car, she noticed her unkempt grass was the longest in the neighborhood. She hadn't saved Tommy's name into her phone, so while she waited at the dealership she called each unassigned number in her call log, to no avail. She ran inside and tapped out the number she knew was his because it was the only thing written on her refrigerator whiteboard. The line picked up and a deep voice rasped from the other end.

"Yello," the man said.

"Hello!" said Eleanor. "I was hoping to speak to Tommy? He was supposed to mow my lawn today, but I got into a car accident on my way home and, anyway, I wasn't here when I should've been. Is he home?"

"This is Tommy," the man said. "I was wondering what happened. Sorry to hear about your accident. You don't live far from us, though, so it wasn't much trouble and my truck was already loaded up. Does tomorrow work for you?"

Eleanor fell silent with the phone to her ear.

"Ma'am?" the man—Tommy—said.

"That'll be fine," she managed. "Same time tomorrow will be fine. Do you like pie?"

*Dewpoint, Spring 2016*

## **Patsy Sings for Me**

Turns out I'm pregnant. I suppose I have to tell Dale now that I'm certain. Sure wasn't what he thought he was getting himself into that night he put Patsy on the jukebox at Flynn's Bar and asked me if I'd like to dance real slow—sticky-hot beer breath on my cheek, his scratchy flannel thick with cigarette smoke. I've tried smoking, but I'm just not good at it. I like that he does, though. I know I'm supposed to scold him, tell him the things will kill him if he doesn't quit, but I love how they make him smell and he just looks so good with a pointer curled around the filter. Maybe that makes me a bad person. Selfish. But I don't have much time left being selfish, so I'm just going to enjoy his smell a little while longer.

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This funny guy came in by himself just now and sat in my section of the diner, in one of my booths. I hate it when people ignore the sign. It says right there, "Please reserve booths for two or more guests." So I asked him, "Sir, do you have another one coming or is it just you tonight," and he looked at me all confused and stuttered, saying he wasn't sure, there might be someone, but he didn't know if she'd show up or not. He seemed antsy, nervous. We aren't too busy tonight, so I figure he can sit in my booth until we are. At shift change, Charity gave me one of those motherhood magazines. I can't believe how much they charge for baby shoes.

That girl showed up. He spilled his coffee all over his book when she walked in. It's been three hours and they're still here. They've killed an entire pot between the two of them, and they're on their second round of ham and waffles. I don't think I've ever seen two

people laugh so much together. Dale and I don't really laugh like that. Sometimes we laugh at the same jokes on TV. He laughs when I ask him if he'd love if I got fat. He laughs and says, "Your titties'd get bigger and I'd love that." My titties haven't gotten any bigger yet.

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I told Dale last night. He didn't have much to say, but Dale never really has much to say. I thought he was maybe happy for a minute, because for him happy starts out the same way as mad. He takes off his ball cap and rubs the back of his neck, but if he's happy he puts the cap back on and smiles. Last night he threw it clear across the room. He didn't make a fuss, but left pretty quick. I watched his truck peel out of the driveway and knew it wasn't to go buy a baby name book.

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My boss found this under the register and asked if I was writing in it on the clock. I said no and that I just thought it would be safe by the register. I think he believed me, but he's also been going real easy on me since he found out about the baby. I think Charity let it slip in front of him, but I don't mind. I'll take what I can get.

The funny guy and that girl are here again, same day as last week. They came together this time. I meant to check their ticket the time before for his name. I like to put names to faces when I can. Anyway, we have this jukebox at the diner. It's four songs for a dollar, and they're doing this thing where he puts in a dollar and picks a song and sits down. And then she gets up, picks a song, and sits down. They do this with each dollar and then sit down and talk and laugh until the songs run out, and then he gets up and puts in another dollar and they do it again.

They don't acknowledge anyone in the place except me to take their order. They're real polite. Smile a lot. They play these old songs, ones my parents used to listen to. I suppose they're about my age—twenty-two, twenty-three maybe—but I feel years older than them. Maybe it's because they're having fun. That night at Flynn's after we were done dancing, Dale pulled me as close as he could and asked if I wanted to go have a little fun.

I'm not sure why he decided to stick around after I told him about the baby. Not that he's a bad guy—he's not. He just isn't the stick-around type. The morning after that night at Flynn's, he ate the bacon and eggs I made then took off. I didn't hear from him for a month before he showed up at my door one morning asking if I'd missed him. A few days later I found out about the baby—the same day I started writing in this thing.

I wonder how things would be different if Dale and I were like Funny Guy and That Girl. What if Dale had been nervous when I walked into Flynn's instead of drunk and cocky? What if we played each other love songs at two a.m. on the jukebox at some greasy spoon? What if we knew how to make each other laugh? But I'm not That Girl. I'm the one who gets knocked up in the cab of a truck and driven home by some still-drunk drifter who passes out on her couch.

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Dale took off again. I'm not sure where he went, but there was some receipt paper on the counter he'd scribbled "3 days" on. When I told Charity he'd gone again she said the reason she gave me that magazine a week or two ago was because she didn't need it anymore. She found out at ten weeks and decided to end it at eleven. She bought the magazine somewhere in between. When I asked her why she didn't keep the baby she

said it was because when she told the guy he left twenty bucks on the coffee table and drove off.

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Today's the third day and Dale hasn't even called. That damn couple's here again, putting happy love songs on the jukebox and acting like they're not playing them for each other. Like they were just in the mood to hear "You Make My Dreams Come True" or "Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch." It made me want to spit on their waffles before I sprayed the whipped cream.

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Dale called last night on a pay phone from God knows where. He was drunk and I couldn't understand much of what he said. When there was a quiet moment I told him I was thinking about having a doctor take care of things before I got too far along. He started crying heavy sobs, like only a man lets loose when his mother dies or he finds Jesus. And then he hung up the phone.

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Funny Guy's here, the usual booth and time, but it's been about an hour and That Girl hasn't shown up. He keeps looking out the window and he's not being rude to me or anything, but he's not smiling either. He seemed different when he came in. Heavy. He only ordered coffee and put on Patsy's "Crazy." I think he and I both got a little lost in it. It's been over a week and Dale's not back yet. I threw that receipt paper away then ate the ham and waffles Funny Guy didn't order.

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The other night after he left I checked his ticket. Funny Guy only signs his initials.



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I asked Charity about how things went for her during the appointment and after. She said it wasn't as painful or dramatic as she expected. She said it felt like bad cramps and some pressure, and she cried a little bit, but she wasn't even sure why. No one went with her, but she lied and said she had someone to pick her up and then just drove herself home and watched movies the rest of the day. She didn't even have to give up her shift the next morning.

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They're both here, same time, same booth, but they came separately and they're not putting anything on the jukebox. He's watching her face so carefully, but she won't hold eye contact with him for very long. She keeps shaking her head and looking down at the paper placemat she's pretty much shredded to bits. He'll ask a question, all calm and sad-looking, and she'll just shake her head again. They started talking like this before I could get over there to take their food order, but I doubt either of them has much of an appetite. Heartache does that. So does growing a baby in your gut. Between the two I haven't been able to keep much down. I don't think Dale's coming back.

That Girl left first, then Funny Guy came up to the register and apologized for not ordering anything. I told him it was okay and that I've been real tired lately and didn't mind the down time. He just stood at the register for a second not saying anything but looking like he wanted to say something. I started to feel the silence and told him the place was real quiet without them playing the jukebox. I think that was the wrong thing to say because his eyes started getting glossy. I panicked and said something about how

they seemed like a sweet couple and that I could tell something was different tonight and I'm sorry and hope everything turns out okay.

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and said, "Thanks. You probably won't be seeing us here together again, but if you ever see her here with someone else, play some Patsy for me, will you?"

I told him I'd do that and not to worry about the coffee tab. After he walked out I unplugged the jukebox for the night.

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When the pregnancy test read positive, I bought this because I thought it might be good for me to write things down, to remember how it all happened and what pregnancy was like and what all was going on while he or she was inside of me. But now it just feels like I've been writing down all the sad and bad and lonely in my life and other people's.

I made an appointment a week from today. Same place Charity went. Maybe I won't have to miss a shift either.

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Tomorrow's the day. I noticed my stomach pooching out this morning and my boobs finally started to swell a little. Because Dale isn't here to notice or care, it's really just a nuisance. Won't be for much longer, though.

That Girl is here tonight, same booth—same side of the booth even—same time. I went to refill her coffee and didn't see she was crying until it was too late and I was reaching for her cup. I asked her if she was all right, and she said she was sorry and she hadn't seen the sign until just then. She pointed to "Please reserve booths for two or more guests," and I told her it was fine, that I didn't mind and she could stay as long as she

wanted. She nodded and walked over to the jukebox. She put on Patsy's "Stand By Your Man." What are the odds of that? She sat down and didn't make a scene, but kept crying. I had the thought that these kids—just a whisper older or younger than me—they don't know what Patsy's singing about. Funny Guy doesn't know loneliness and That Girl wouldn't know how to stand by her man through the thick and thin of it. How to stand by him even when he's cold and hard and gone.

I'm the girl who gets knocked up in the cab of a truck, but I'm also the girl who makes bacon and eggs in the morning if he's still around when I wake up. I'm the girl who gets receipt paper scrawled with a lie and keeps it in her wallet, pulling it out on breaks to remind herself he cared enough to leave a note. I'm the girl who gets a drunken phone call at four in the morning after an eight-hour overnight at a shithole diner who will listen to him cry and ramble and still tell him to come home, wherever he is, come back to me.

Tonight, she put on Patsy, but last week when Funny Guy—the one who pays a quarter a song for four hours straight; the one who orders two rounds of breakfast and bottomless coffees and won't let her touch the check; the Funny Guy who takes it as a challenge when she stops laughing for more than a minute's time—when he was staring out the window just a foot from where she's sitting right now, hoping she'd show up, where was she? What did she think she had found that was so much better? There is nothing better. She doesn't know what it means to stand by her man, but I'll bite my tongue let her think she's the one Patsy's singing for.

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When I got home from that last shift, I only had a few hours to sleep before my appointment, and I found Dale on my porch. He was sober and asked if I'd missed him. He asked if he was too late. I sat on the couch and he crouched at my feet and held onto my ankles, saying, "Please, I love you. I need you, please." He made all these promises about staying put and providing, and he cried without me trying to make him. I told him I loved him, too, but that I'd had the procedure done days ago. I said I was so tired from work, but he could stay on the couch and we'd talk after I got some rest. A couple hours later my alarm went off for me to get up and dressed for the clinic. I went downstairs and found fifty dollars on the dinette with a note that said, "My share."

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Boss lets me keep a stool behind the register now, which makes writing a whole lot easier. I hunch less and don't have to shift my weight from foot to foot. It's their night, but the booth is empty, and I've got the jukebox playing songs somewhere between happy and sad. Last night I made myself spaghetti and when I went to throw away the empty sauce jar I had this idea. I cut a slit in the metal lid, big enough for tips and change, and made a label for the outside. I figure I should start saving now because baby shoes don't come cheap.

*Midwestern Gothic*, Summer 2015

## **Anatomy of a Father, of a Moose**

Dad didn't like guns. He was a military man and a decent shot, but he didn't like their weight, their potential. He preferred the hollow ones attached by a tube to the front of *Area 51* in the base arcade where we killed aliens and shot off screen to reload. During his two deployments in Bosnia, my ages seven and nine, he had to sling an M16 across his back every morning before he left the barracks. He deployed to Iraq when I was thirteen and Kuwait when I was fourteen, and during that time he holstered a 9mm at his right thigh. He never had to shoot, though. Never even reached for the guns. His job kept him behind a desk and away from any combat, but he had to carry one anyway, part of the uniform. Dad was a quiet man, strong and honest—gentle, and I loved him for it. We didn't know each other well, which is odd to say about a father who wasn't absent in the usual sense. He provided, never willingly abandoned, but was absent nevertheless.

When he got back from Kuwait I was fifteen and we received orders to an airbase in the heart of Alaska. It was a two-week road trip from the Virginia coast, just the three of us. I watched movies in the back seat, picking new ones at Wal-Marts in every state we crossed or clipped—each of us in our own little worlds. Mom wasn't a mystery to me, and I didn't wonder what she thought about or have questions tucked away I was too nervous to ask. It was a mutual discomfort between Dad and me, father and daughter. We were both at a loss and Mom was there floating between us.

When we arrived at our new home in August, the first snow of the season had yet to fall, but the days were cool and the nights already cold. The nearest town was North Pole, which was home to The Santa Clause House (open year-round), a Blockbuster, a McDonalds, and a grocery store open from eight to eight. We attended Pioneer Baptist—

a small, wooden church painted white and carved into a grove of birches. At a glance it looked like a one-room, but it was two stories with the Sunday school rooms on the first floor and the sanctuary in the basement. The foyer was carpeted, and during the eight months there was snow on the ground and for breakup in spring the carpet was a sponge you couldn't ring out, one big mudroom. Downstairs the floors were tiled in white vinyl and there was a kitchen at the back with an industrial Bunn coffee maker from the eighties. Every Sunday there was a morning service, a potluck lunch, and an afternoon service so no one had to brave the roads to come back in the evening.

The first time I tried moose was in a potluck chili Pastor Jack's wife, Linda, brought for lunch one Sunday in late September. It was good chili, and I never would have known except she asked me how I liked the moose meat. We were still new to the area, and I'm sure she guessed I'd never had it. She said it was the last from the church hunt the year before.

"The men go every October, take the older boys and do some father-son bonding," she said. "We'll have to see if we can't get your dad to come along this year." Mom was home sick that Sunday, so Dad let me drive home after second service. I navigated the sheets of ice with caution in our white Ford Expedition, the one we'd driven across the States and up through Canada.

"Miss Linda said all the church men go on a moose hunt next month," I said to Dad, who was in the passenger seat. "She said they're gonna try and get you to go."

"Yeah, Jack invited me last week. I was thinking about it."

"But you don't hunt," I said, turning my head to look at him. A warm sensation gripped the nape of my neck at the thought of him coming home with blood on his boots, on his gloves. "You don't even own a gun."

"Eyes on the road," he said, pointing us into the white ahead. "It's what they do here, and Jack said I could use one of his. They're just trying to keep the population down in the woods near town. Moose cause a lot of accidents." He considered this a moment, and then said—more to himself, it seemed, than to me—"It's actually more of a moral obligation."

Back at the house, Mom had soup on the stove—bouillabaisse in the Dutch oven her mother let her take when she left home. Its red enamel coating had chipped some from the lid and the handles, and the white inside was stained and burned from decades of roasts and curries and sauces. Dad kissed Mom on the cheek and went into the living room to watch football, and I hopped onto the counter next to a sticky cutting board that was pungent with garlic and onion. Mom drank from a bottle of chardonnay before measuring a cup for the pot and then added a pinch each of fennel, celery seed, and saffron.

"I think Dad's going on a hunting trip with the men from church," I said, ripping at an onion skin.

"Oh, I doubt that." She slid her finger down the list of ingredients to find her place. "You know he doesn't care for guns."

"He said he was thinking about it. I don't like it. I'm not sure why, but I just don't. Miss Linda said it's some father-son thing, too."

"Well, I'll be surprised if he goes, but if he does, he knows what he's doing. Are you afraid he'll get hurt?"

"No." I ran a hand through my hair before realizing it smelled like onion. "I don't know. What if he likes it?"

"Would that be so bad? He's never really had a hobby, just sports," she said. I could hear the referee's call echoing in the other room. "Neither of us has many friends here yet. It could be good for him."

"It doesn't freak you out, the idea of him killing something?"

She stopped stirring and thought before answering.

"I guess I'm not crazy about the idea, but I wouldn't say it freaks me out. I trust your father. He's a good man, hon, he really is. I know you don't feel very close to him right now." She set the spoon down, turning to me. "You know what? You should go with him."

"What?" I asked, glancing at his flattop bristling above the back of the lounge. "I can't go *hunting*. Besides, it's a guys' trip anyway. He probably wouldn't even want me to go."

"Well, you never know until you ask," she said, taking up the spoon again.

The soup was boiling.

Dad and I hadn't talked much since he came back from Kuwait. Really, we hadn't talked much since I got that stomach ache in Barnes & Noble when I was eleven and then wiped red in the bathroom stall. I could remember a time when he was my favorite person, a time when my problems were easy to solve. A scraped knee asked a few splashes of



peroxide and a Popsicle to ease the pain, and a ride on his shoulders let me see high above the crowd at the Fourth of July air show on the flight line behind our house. When I was thirteen and my first boyfriend broke up with me, Mom sat on my daybed and let me cry into her lap, Dad downstairs in the living room. She stroked my hair, and I wiped at the snot bubbling from my nose with the sleeve of my hoodie. After about twenty minutes, I heard him walking up the stairs and thought he might be coming to hold a few of my broken pieces, to teach me something about boys and the ways of love and call me sweetheart. He pushed the door open but didn't come in, only stood there and asked, his voice gentle and a touch higher than its usual pitch, if I wouldn't like to come downstairs and play a few hands of Gin Rummy.

The Sunday before the hunt, Pastor Jack brought Dad a .270 Winchester. During potluck, when the boys usually pulled parkas and boots over their Sunday best to chase each other through the woods, instead they all gathered around Pastor's tailgate as he handed the rifle over to Dad. He pointed out its various features, telling him to smooth his hand over the walnut stock, selling him on the hunt less than a week away. I sipped lukewarm Folgers and watched from a window in the foyer, the carpet squishing under my feet. I hadn't asked if I could go with him, still wasn't sure I wanted to. I watched him with the rifle, turning it over in his hands, pulling at knobs and levers, glancing through the scope. He handled it so naturally, there with snow clumped in the tread of his boots. My father who didn't like guns for reasons he never gave, but maybe it was because he knew what bad men were capable of, how much they could take without asking. Maybe he thought it was something in the blood.

Dad's father was an Army man and a drunk. I learned this from my mother, as I did most things I know about my father's life, at the kitchen counter after she'd poured her second drink. His father received a Bad Conduct Discharge when Dad was thirteen. This was the grandfather I never met, who died of lung cancer when I was a baby. Dad spent his teenage years up late making sure his father made it to the couch, but keeping him out of his sisters' room and away from his mother, who had taken to washing down her sleeping pills with gin. There was a time, Mom said, that he sat at the top of the stairs and watched his father work the doorknob under the back porch light, watched his hazy form through the window; he'd learned it was best not to try and speed things along. He heard the key ting against the ground and then saw his father's fist come through the bottom pane of glass, reaching around for the twist lock, blood on the white gossamer curtain. It chewed up his hand and wrist pretty well, nicked an artery; Dad wrapped his father's hand in a dishtowel before driving to the urgent care. On her third glass of wine she added to the story that sometimes Dad said he wished he'd just gone to bed and let his father bleed out on the kitchen floor.

My breath fogged the glass as a little boy tugged at Dad's coat as he considered the rifle. Dad smiled down at the boy as a father would a son, with a different kind of love in his eyes. He held the gun out for the boy to run his little hand across. He would have liked to have had a son, would have been better with a boy than he was with me; Mom has said so too. Dad nodded to Pastor and then walked to put the gun in our trunk. They shook hands and came back in together, past me at the window.

"Young lady, we're turning your father into a true Alaska woodsman," he said, patting my back and spilling my coffee. Dad smiled at the thought.

At home, he unloaded the gun from the trunk, and I clapped my boots in the mudroom. When he came through the door, I asked without thinking, with just a picture of the little boy from church in my head, "Can go on that hunting trip with you?"

He was quiet, which wasn't unusual, and hung up his coat.

"I know it's a guys' trip and more of a father-son thing, but you said it's what they do here and I could probably learn something, you know?" I said, nervous, rambling. "I don't really want to shoot anything, and I know you have to have a license for that anyway, but I'd like to come along and watch. I could help carry things. I promise I won't talk this much."

"Well, I think that'd be fine," he said, and laughed.

"Yeah?" I smiled because I couldn't help it. "You don't think anyone'll mind?"

"I guess we're kind of bucking tradition." He paused. "But I'll talk to Jack. If they're all bringing their sons and you want to come along, I don't see why it'd be problem." He brushed at the back of his neck. "We'll butcher the moose afterward, though, back at the church. I guess you could help the ladies back in the kitchen with lunch?"

"I think I'd be okay, maybe," I said, trying not to think of wet fur and serrated knives, of dead eyes and dry tongues. "But I can come?"

"You can come. We leave 7 a.m. Saturday."

I can remember only one story from Dad's childhood that he told me himself. It was a hot day during summer vacation and he was nine. He and his brother were biking home from the pool, and they stopped by the air-conditioned bank where they knew the tellers put donuts out for customers in the afternoon. They leaned their bikes against the bushes and peeked through the glass as they strategized, locating the platter on a lobby table and then walking quietly through the doors when the tellers were occupied. They grabbed two each from the table and ran out, stuffed the donuts in their mouths and took off on their bikes. They stopped a couple blocks away to enjoy them properly.

This was the story Dad told. When I asked him for another, a family trip or his first date or what he was like in school, he said he had a bad memory, couldn't remember much else. My guess is there were many nights of drunken accidents and broken glass; nights spent herding his parents to soft places they could sleep off their respective stupors. My guess is he remembered plenty more than chocolate donuts on a hot afternoon, just nothing he wanted to burden me with at ages eight or ten or twelve. Eventually I stopped asking.

The morning of the hunt I layered long underwear under sweatpants under snow pants and stuffed the pockets of my coat with extra hand warmers. We had neck gaiters and thick caps and gloves so stiff with insulation I could barely move my fingers. Mom filled a green Stanley thermos with hot black coffee and wrapped up two toasted Pop-Tarts for me. We rode with Pastor Jack and his son and one of the deacon's boys who snorted when he saw the pink frosting and sprinkles in my paper towel. The boys were a little older than me—seventeen or so. They talked locations, guns and bullets. Dad and I were

quiet, new to the game, and so it seemed, for at least a moment, two points on the same line. I sipped coffee from the thermos lid and passed it to Dad, who took it with a small smile and a nod. I looked out the window, at a place still so new to me. The early-morning Alaska cold was like a pause, like something that was already a memory.

When we got out of the car I shouldered the bag closest to me, and Dad took up the Winchester. As men piled out of other trucks and loaded guns I watched the fluid surrender of civil twilight to sunrise. We set out on the hunt and I kept stride with my father, the swish of our snow pants falling in and out of rhythm. As we walked, I thought of blood pooled in clear plastic stretched across the white tile floor where Pastor Jack gave his sermons and read verses from a worn leather copy of the King James. I thought of the red satin sash draped over the wooden cross behind the pulpit. I thought of the grandfather I never met and how his blood was Dad's blood and that blood was mine. I thought of the gun strapped to his back, holstered at his thigh, the one he held now with two hands, the one he'd use for killing, that would make it easier to kill.

It was an hour before he took a shot. The other men had scattered with their boys, and it was just the two of us in a clearing. When he set himself and took aim for the bull's lung cavity, I paused with the cold and breathed heavy against wet fleece. I'm not sure why, I still don't know why, but he flinched. The bullet missed the torso entirely, hitting instead the bull's jaw. From Dad's mouth came a white cloud, a piercing, anguished cry louder than the crack of the bullet, the crack of the moose's jaw, and he took off after the thing which had run back into the trees. I tried to keep up, but with the boots and layers and a bag bouncing at my hip, I didn't make it far. I stopped, out of breath, with the red trail at my feet; the moose would bleed out, or starve to death if it didn't. Dad had

disappeared, and with none of the other men in sight, I waited. I dropped the bag at my feet and took two hand warmers from my pocket. I peeled open the foil and slipped the white packets into the palms of my gloves. Another shot cut through the silence. It felt so much colder standing still and time seemed to stop with me. There was no wind, no movement in the trees or on the ground. The snow was bright, blinding, but I couldn't see the sun, no blue in the sky. I'm not sure how long I had been waiting when I saw Dad emerge from the tree line; it could have been two minutes or twenty. I walked to meet him. His mouth was exposed, and when we were close I saw his eyes were red and wet.

"Did you find it?" I asked, pulling my mask down too.

Our breath met between us in a puff of white and I saw little icicles had formed over the hairs of his mustache.

"Yes," he said. "Put your mask back on. I need to find Jack."

Some of the men congregated, and Pastor sent the boys and me into the surrounding woods for sturdy branches to prop open the ribcage. I wanted to do right by my father, for us to experience something new and hard and good together, to be reminded of the blood we shared. And though I didn't know if this—the killing and butchering—was the right thing, I knew it was a start. When the boys and I got back, the men were already at work. Pastor had cut the moose from stern to stem and asked Dad to stand on one side of the body; they curled their fingers inside and counted to three. I stood with my back against a tree, staring up at the white Alaskan light, a mess of treetops. There was a pop, and the boys were ready with the branches. They wedged a couple inside, and Pastor began hefting out what was never meant to be seen by anyone but God. Dad reached his hands

in too, and as he removed a weighty, steaming organ—I wasn't sure which one—with such care, I was surprised at the intimacy. The red mass overflowed from his two palms and strained at the gaps between his fingers. He placed it on the plastic they'd laid out, and I took a few steps toward him.

"Can I?" I asked, gesturing to the cavity.

Dad looked to Pastor. "Mind if she helps me with the heart?"

I put on gloves and reached in with him; we cupped our hands around the thick muscle, and once we began to lift I knew he could have done it alone. I thought that from the inside, death would be more obvious, like the slick stillborn I'd seen delivered in a movie, clearly cold and gone, but the moose's heart was still hot and so red you'd have expected it to beat. We set it next to the other parts, and Pastor kept on until the moose was empty. When it was time to skin it, he made the cuts, peeled back a lip of fur, and asked me if I'd like to take a side. I looked to Dad, who gave me a nod and what I think was the beginning of a smile he decided was not appropriate given the circumstances. Pastor counted down again from three, and we jerked at the skin together until it separated from the white membrane coating the bones and muscle, like the thin layer beneath the shell of a hard-boiled egg.

"Not bad, young lady," he said to me. "Your dad and I've got it from here."

"How about you see if there's any of that coffee left," Dad said before taking up the saw.

Dad and I drove home in silence with a trunk full of wrapped meat, parcels they'd divvied up back at the church where Miss Linda and some of the wives had been waiting with

pans of noodles masked by congealed layers of cheese. When we pulled into the driveway he put the car in park and turned to me.

"Do you think we could keep the hunt between us?" He looked earnest and a little afraid, though I wasn't sure what there was to be afraid of. "I didn't mean to yell like that or to leave you behind when I went to chase down the moose, and, if it's all the same to you, I'd prefer your mother didn't know."

"I won't say anything," I said; then added, "and I wasn't scared. Of you, or anything else."

"Good, sweetheart." He popped the trunk, and we carried the meat, piece by piece, to the deep freeze.



## **Fraîche**

### *Fraîche*

*{a unique menu each and every day}*

*He chose this place because it sounds expensive and he wants to get laid. But you still don't want to order anything too expensive because if you go home with him after he's shelled out \$80 for dinner, he'll probably feel like he doesn't have to go downtown. I'd keep it under \$18.99 just to be safe.*

## **‡ Appetizers**

### **Toasted Brioche with Crème Fraîche and Caviar 16**

*That time you watched your dad at the plywood cleaning station in the backyard as he slit the belly of the crappie and it felt like it was your belly instead. It had a yellow sack inside he pulled out and fed to the dog.*

### **Mushroom Caps with Garlic & Feta 12**

*Flavors you'll still be swishing from your teeth tomorrow with your morning coffee. At his place or yours? What if he doesn't have a coffee pot? You should probably find out if he has one.*

## **‡ Salad of the Day**

### **Arugula with Shaved Parmesan and Strawberry Balsamic Vinaigrette 15**

*Bawl-sawl-mic. Buh-sawl-mic. Bassal-mic. Ball-saw-mic. Nailed it. If you order this, though, you'll have to say it out loud. You could point to it, maybe. You should probably just order something else.*

## **‡ Featured Entrées**

### **Roast Quail with Cornbread Stuffing in a Port-Orange Reduction 21**

*There's something delicate about him. Your mother would say his features are "birdlike." You imagine his head disappearing into the cave of sheets around your legs, like a woodpecker in the knot of a tree, a finch in the hole of a birdhouse.*

### **Ginger Glazed Mahi Mahi 26**

*When you were ten you heard on a television segment that plastic six-pack holders were a deadly danger to the dolphin population; their round noses would get stuck in the rings and they wouldn't be able to open their mouths and they'd die. You*

*cried thinking of all the dolphins you could've saved had you just snipped the plastic like the television voice implored. You were inconsolable. You cut up every one you came across well into your high-school years. You don't anymore, though. You're not sure when you stopped.*

## ‡ And For Dessert

### **Kahlua Flan with Cinnamon & Caramel Cream** 10

*By the time you taste this, you'll know what he does each day at work and whether his parents are still alive; together; in love. You'll know his favorite movie and why it's his favorite movie, and, hopefully, whether or not he has a coffee pot. You will have noticed the shape his mouth takes when he laughs and if he salts his food without tasting it first. You've probably had too much wine, which means you're not smiling with teeth until you can slip off to the bathroom to rub the purple away with a paper towel. You might be considering the way his stubble would feel against your thighs and hoping to God the check is under eighty bucks.*

*{Bon Appétit}*

*Sierra Nevada Review, Spring 2016*

## CREATIVE NONFICTION

### **It's All in Your Head**

My general physician was an old man with sausage fingers and a thick neck. For a while I was seeing him for my yearly female exam, and he always chose the moment he inserted the speculum to ask me how school was going. For what would turn out to be only a minor bacterial infection, he referred me to a gynecologist down the hall from his office, who was also a man in his late sixties. The gynecologist wore blue jeans and a polo during our appointment rather than the scrubs and thin, white lab coat to which I was accustomed. A young man with a death grip on a clipboard shadowed the doctor and never once spoke to me, nor was he ever introduced. I wondered if he would be present for the examination and, now acutely aware of my nakedness beneath the threadbare cotton gown, looked at my pants on the chair by the closed door. As I began describing my symptoms, the doctor interrupted to ask me if "it" smelled like a can of tuna. When I said no, he held up a finger to quiet me and made a move to answer his buzzing cell phone. He spent minutes with the thing to his ear, never bothering to leave the room, pulling it away from his face half-a-dozen times to press buttons. He didn't say a word save for the initial hello, leaving the shadow and me to an uncomfortable silence he filled with the rustling of papers on his clipboard. When the doctor hung up the phone, he informed us it was a survey.

In a tone that suggested he had already expended any patience he may've had for my little problem, he told me I had bacterial vaginosis—a common infection that is only dangerous if left untreated. He never examined me; he didn't take any samples; he prescribed Clindamycin—the last medication I would ever take without first poring over

the pharmacy pamphlet and searching for testimonials and worst-case-scenarios online. The last time I would ever take a pill without wondering, *What if my prescription was switched with someone else's? What if this is a medication I'm allergic to and don't know it yet? What if there's a more natural solution? What if I was misdiagnosed and the actual problem just gets worse? What if... What if... What if...*

On the way out of the hospital—the last hospital I would ever walk into or out of without a twist in my gut and bits of cuticle between my teeth—I got a flu shot because my mother had been on my case about it for weeks. The nurse was an older woman who hesitated to stick me when she saw the gypsy head tattooed on my left bicep. *I just don't want to ruin that pretty picture*, she said, embarrassed by her false start or scandalized by the permanence of the ink; I wasn't sure which. And then I went home.

The air outside was clean and frigid. It was one of those sun-strong winter days that looked like mid-summer. One that warmed the inside of your car and if you sat and ignored the barren trees, you wouldn't be able to tell which season you were in. Home then was a three-bedroom house with Neil, whom I had been with since I was 19. He was five years older than me and a talented, albeit unmotivated, illustrator. While he was a man's man who enjoyed grilling, fishing, beer, and baseball, he was also creative and visionary, abstract in his thinking; he wanted to know more about everything. I admired his curiosity and learned from it—lessons I'm still grateful for today. We made each other laugh, drank beers and cocktails and cooked together, and we steered clear of the uncomfortable topics—past loves and heartaches, our fears about the future, our expired Christian faiths, and our relationships with our parents. We kept it light. I remember hearing a conversation between characters on a sitcom about how there was always a

reacher and a settler in a relationship; one person managed to reach a little out of their league, and one person settled for a little less than they could have had. There was an unspoken understanding from the beginning of the relationship that I was the reacher; I was the lucky one.

I learned what Neil did not like in a woman and I tried not to be those things. I didn't tell him when I had a headache or whine too much after a bad day; I did not rely too heavily on my mom for emotional support, really did not talk to her much at all during the years I was with him, and I kept it quiet from Neil when my dad helped me with rent or grocery money. I kept my nails long and stopped biting my cuticles to avoid "lesbian hands," which he found unappealing. I never asked him if he watched porn and I faked orgasms to force the illusion of a healthy sex life. I knew he wouldn't like that I couldn't drink while taking Clindamycin, but the doctor had said it would make me very sick if I mixed the two so I abstained. That night we went to a late showing of *Her*—the latest from Joaquin Phoenix.

I had taken the medicine before we left for the theater, and as we watched the movie my forearms and hands began to tingle and numb. I was restless through the movie—stretching my arms, clenching my fists, wiggling my fingers. I couldn't shake the feeling, and as the movie went on, as Joaquin fell hard for his sultry, Scarlett Johansson-voiced operating system, my discomfort grew. I said nothing, of course, because Neil did not like drama or women who let their emotions dictate, women who were weak. *You should be stronger than this*, I can still hear him say as we fought during one of our last nights together.

Lying in bed after the movie, I could feel the numbness creep into my toes, and as he slept, shakes began to rack my body. My stomach turned and I crept to the bathroom. I kneeled on the fuzzy, toilet-hugging rug and vomited as I shook, wrapping my arms, still pins and needles, around my stomach. I cried quietly there on the bathroom floor for a few minutes before tip-toeing into the bedroom for my cell phone. In the spare room I pulled the door shut and curled up on our chaise lounge; I called my mom. Holding my knees to my chest and the phone to my ear, I shook as I detailed every symptom. I told her I was afraid, said if I died—something I don't recall having considered before that day, not really—that I didn't know what would happen, where I was going. *Let me pray for you*, she said.

I grew up in a Southern Baptist household; Bible verses and prayer, words like sin, faith, and salvation, were part of our everyday language. The three of us—Mom, Dad, and I—we were Christians who would one day go to heaven. I never thought about death because it was emphasized that death was not really a thing. There was a physical end proceeded instantly by eternal life. There was no need to ever fear death, or to even think about it, because the afterlife was promised to be perfect—a perfection we were not capable of comprehending. It was just before my sophomore year of college when I "quit" religion cold turkey. It had begun to feel arbitrary—sinning and repentance, sermons and testimonies, the preordained paths we worried ourselves about following—and many of the Christians I knew were no kinder or more generous than those who held other beliefs or none at all. What I wasn't prepared for, though, was that in giving up my faith I also forfeited my God-given right to claim eternal security, and when I was faced with something threatening, I no longer felt I could pray or deserved comfort from the

God I couldn't claim with my whole heart, the God I wasn't sure I believed in as He was packaged for me. But Southern Baptists also believe in intercessory prayer, and so I let my mother beseech the God she was certain of on behalf of her prodigal daughter. There on the chaise lounge, fraying and feeling utterly alone, I let my mother pray calm and healing over my body and peace over my mind. It did the trick for the night, and at some point I went back to bed, though I don't remember anything after the word *amen*.

I leaned heavily on my mom the following weeks, texting her all throughout the day. As much as I relied on her for comfort and support, I relied on WebMD and online forums for diagnoses. I had cancers and Carpal tunnel and Guillain-Barré from the flu shot. I shared with Neil some of what I was going through, but he had little patience and no sympathy. We had never been through anything trying; our relationship remained untested.

Neil did not mind problems he could see and make sense of, but my newfangled sickness was not anything he could attest to. I had developed a few new compulsions, one of which was routinely feeling at the lymph nodes in my neck—something my mother had done when I was a child when she thought I might be getting sick. With the anxieties taking a toll on my appetite, I lost weight, and the nodes in my neck became more pronounced. I knew the shape and location of each, their range of mobility and level of solidity. I checked on them hourly, feeling for changes in size or tenderness to indicate infection or lymphoma. When I discovered a new node or a lump I wasn't sure belonged, Neil would play along and let me feel for a similar shape in his own body. As I probed his neck or back or armpit with my fingers, he never looked up from whatever he was doing—reading or video games. I was grateful for his cooperation in this way because

from it I often received a momentary peace of mind, but each time I asked this of him, it was an open admission of my vulnerability and weakness, my feebleness of mind and character.

I had begun having panic attacks, though I did not know that's what they were as they were happening. They would hit me in the middle of the coffee shop where I sat studying—a racing heart, hot flashes, dizziness, blurred vision, and nausea. They would come at me in the middle of class—tingling hands and feet and the appearance of everything in the room as if I were seeing it from the inside of a fishbowl. I had no history of panic attacks or any debilitating anxiety, and yet when I described the episodes to my mother she understood and defined them as such. An ER doctor would confirm this diagnosis one night when I arrived just after an attack during my shift at the cupcake shop where I worked. It was not the extremely rare Guillain-Barré syndrome from my flu shot weeks earlier, and it was not Carpal tunnel from frosting cupcakes part-time. It was not pregnancy causing my nausea or cancer causing the tenderness of the lymph nodes in my neck. When I described that first night after taking Clindamycin, the night which set everything in motion, the doctor told me something the gynecologist had not: if I had any alcohol in my system that day, even something from the night before, it could exacerbate my body's response to the medication. My body had been responding to the mingling of new medication with the leftovers from a shared six-pack the night before. Every symptom present in the weeks that followed was a result of anxiety. *It's all in your head.*

I thought the understanding of this would make it all go away, and so did Neil. It made sense that once a medical professional told me my symptoms were made manifest by my subconscious that I would be able to press on, that when unfounded fears cropped



up I would be able to dismiss them as irrational. But I quickly found this was not the case. Understanding that the origins of the symptoms were not threatening did not stop me from feeling them. Each aching node and tingling extremity and heart palpitation was felt just the same—the symptoms and the cause bled together, indistinguishable one from the other, feeding from the same bowl.

We did not last much longer, Neil and I. One night as we were going to bed I asked if he ever planned to propose. Our families had been expecting it, as I had, for over a year, but Neil had made no mention of it in months.

"It's just not the right time. We can't even keep the house clean for Christ's sake," he said, gesturing at the general must and disarray in an attempt to sidestep the issue we both knew was at the heart of everything, the proverbial elephant in the room: I had an anxiety disorder, and he wanted to see if it would go away, if I would return to "normal," before he signed himself up for a life with me.

He hemmed and hawed, but I kept pushing and eventually he said it.

"The way you've been this last month has got me thinking. It's made me imagine life like this, like what if you never change," he said. "It's like you're a different person, and if this is how you're going to be, I don't know if I can deal with it forever."

I told him not to follow me, though I had desperately hoped he would, and went into the kitchen. It was the early hours of the morning and every light in the house, in the neighborhood, was dark. I doubled over and sobbed as quietly as I had that night in the bathroom weeks earlier, the night I now recognize as the dawning of a years-long struggle with hypochondria—one that has yet to lose its grip on me—the focus of the quake. There in the blue-black kitchen, the cold tile under my feet, my floral nightgown

bunched in my fists for the agony of the situation, I knew I could not stay with a man so easily shaken, who had seen me at what I thought was my best and, in one bad month out of twenty-eight together, had begun to question it all, allowing his perception of my character to be altered. I had stopped being fun, and for him that changed everything. One night a few weeks after the break-up, my mom said to me, "You two had a lot of fun together. But there's a big difference between having fun and being happy." Neither Neil nor I was happy, and I wondered if we ever really had been. There was no trust, no sympathy or patience, and his love for me was contingent upon my equilibrium, my ability to stimulate and entertain without rocking the boat.

One evening in late February I did what would have seemed impossible just a month earlier. I walked out of the warm home we'd filled with thrifted knick-knacks and Wal-Mart rugs; I left Neil. I did not expect it to be complicated and missing him had not been a consequence in my mind because deep down I knew it was the right choice. I thought the logical, intentional decision to leave him would allow me to escape regret, but in the years that followed I would learn that walking away is only a literal, physical act—a bluff. The leaving takes time; it is a grieving process, and not one that lasts half the length of the relationship like the magazines say. It takes as long as it takes. Neil moved on quickly, buying a house and moving in his new girlfriend, though I'm sure he went through his own stages of grief—or at least that's the hope, isn't it? I moved back in with my parents for a few months before finding my own apartment and starting graduate school. The hypochondria was masked for a time as the grieving of our relationship demanded much of my headspace. I never went on any anxiety medication, and it seemed I wouldn't need to after my body bounced back from the attacks. Eventually, everything

settled down. Or, rather, fell dormant. The moment I shut the door behind me, Neil and I were over. He didn't chase after me, never called in the days or weeks that followed; we never spoke again. If only my illness, too, had been so quick to let me walk away.

## **Empire Blue**

### **Fort Monroe, Virginia, 2003**

We drove in the day before Hurricane Isabel with our lives blocking the rear view of our Ford Expedition. There was no available housing on Langley Air Force Base, so we were assigned to a duplex on Fort Monroe, a neighboring Army base. Fort Monroe is an island in the Chesapeake Bay connected by a short bridge to the Virginia mainland. Our little home was two stories of crumbling red brick, and after the hurricane washed saltwater over the island, everything green turned brown or gray. We would turn back and drive inland to ride out the storm, but not before standing on the seawall together, Mom, Dad, and I, to watch a fleet of Naval ships and submarines from Norfolk set out toward the horizon, for safety.

My mother grew up the middle child of a poor Navy family, and from the time she was born, she moved every two years. She was shy and fearful, the worst-case-scenario for a perpetual new girl. She said she wore dresses too short, even by 1970s standards, because new ones cost money her parents didn't have. Her father was a harsh man—a submariner, a pipe smoker, and a hothead. He was absent throughout her childhood, far more than my father from my own, which left her working mother greatly burdened with three children and a house to keep. Growing up, I wondered at my grandmother's grim mouth and vacant eyes in old photographs because the woman I knew was quick to laugh, full of warmth and kindness. I would learn her sepia-toned gaze was one of an eighth-grade dropout who married a sailor at fifteen to get away from an abusive, alcoholic father. It was the face of a woman who married a man with a short fuse, a man out to sea nine

months of every year, a man who kept her pregnant through her late teens and early twenties. Precious years of independence, of self-discovery, lost to swollen ankles and crying babies and dinner on the table every night at five-thirty.

If you asked me what I wanted to be, from the time I was a little girl until my freshman year of college, I would have told you I wanted to be a homemaker. Grandma worked various jobs to help support a struggling household, and when I was growing up my mother worked periodically to help with credit card payments or to stave off a restlessness that still plagues her to this day. But ultimately, their lives were their children; they were homemakers. My mother's side of the family is devoutly religious—Baptist mostly—and they subscribe to Old Testament views on where a woman's value lies—in the home she keeps and the food she makes, in her children, which are her crowning glory, and in the respect she has for her husband who is the head of the household. As I transitioned into my sophomore year of college, I chose to abandon the Christian faith in which I had been raised and did my best to toss off the Southern Baptist ideologies so deeply engrained in my being. With that abandonment came many changes, including a newfound understanding of myself as a singular person, an individual without a preordained path laid out for her. For the first time my life was mine and not something I was living to honor someone else with, and while that was exhilarating, it also instigated a passionate revolt against the life my mother and grandmother had settled into. I was—am—terrified of being owned. By a god or a man or a child or a place. By anyone or anything but myself.

## **RAF Lakenheath, England, 1999**

It was the summer of butterflies. Monarchs and painted ladies, I would later learn, but to us they were the common and uncommon butterflies, respectively. I was seven, and my friends and I spent hours catching them in whatever containers our moms let us take from the kitchen cabinets. Mine was an empty Ragu jar, the label scrubbed clean off for a full view, with holes Mom tapped into the metal lid using a Phillip's head and a hammer from Dad's olive drab, military-issue tool bag. It was my family's last summer on RAF Lakenheath, an Air Force base 80 miles north of London, and the butterfly bush in our front yard smelled sweet and delicate, like the trellis of honeysuckle over my grandparents' porch in San Diego, like the sprig of jasmine a boyfriend's Sri Lankan mother would one day tuck behind my ear.

The *Buddleja davidii*, or Empire Blue, is a cultivar heavy with cone-shaped clusters of tiny purple flowers interspersed between narrow, soft green leaves. Some know the bush as we did, a butterfly bush. They attract hummingbirds and bees as well, but we only ever saw butterflies. The bushes grow to be about five feet tall and wide, but I remember getting lost inside of it, thick as a cornfield, stalks towering above our heads so high we couldn't see our houses, so dense with purple and green we had to call out to each other, *Any luck?* The *Buddleja davidii* takes so easily to most soils that in Australia and parts of the U.S. it's considered a weed—a fragrant, seductive trespasser. It's known to thrive in areas of disruption. You can find it in a roadside ditch next to fast food cups and candy wrappers, among the rocks on a craggy mountain path, pushing through the tired cracks of a land made barren by fire; your hook might catch in its leaves as you reel

in a line from the riverbank. If cut down to a stump at the end of its flowering season, it will come back fuller the following year.

In the shadows of the living room, what was left of the evening light deigning through our sliding glass doors, I asked where my mother was. It was not usual for Dad to pick me up from wherever I had been. He did not like the question, more probably did not like the answer, was not used to telling me the hard things.

"Your mother is in the hospital. She'll be there for a couple weeks."

*Why?*

"She's just a little sad right now."

*Why?*

"That's what she's trying to figure out, sweetheart."

We learned it was best to approach butterflies from behind, where we figured we were out of their line of vision, and to make a V with the lid and rim of the container. Once we were close enough to the creature slowly lowering its wings and folding them up together again, showing in turn its beauty and banality, we clapped the lid tight to the container, trapping the butterfly inside. We watched them panic, observed the colors and shapes on their wings until they calmed down and stood at the base of the container with their wings closed in silent protest against our curious stares; how warped and fish-eyed we must have looked through the curvature of the glass. When they were still and showed to us only the muddled underside of their wings, we released them back into the bush for another one of us to catch.

I remember only one visit while she was in the hospital; she took me to the art therapy room and showed me a ceramic trivet she made. She pulled it out of a little

cubbyhole and we sat in plastic chairs with metal, hairpin legs—the same we had at Lakenheath Elementary. It was a mosaic of Persian blue and crimson tiles pressed into white grout, and I told her it was beautiful. I remember her in a white hospital gown peppered with pale blue dots, but she was probably wearing jeans and a T-shirt. When she came home it was all the same to me, everything was as it should be. I didn't know the reason she was sad was because she couldn't bring herself to leave my father, and I didn't know the reason she couldn't leave him was because I loved him too much, loved him enough for the both of us. *You were the glue.* The trivet has been on the kitchen counter in every home we've lived in since. It's on their counter now, stained with sauce from jars of Ragu and chipped because I'm clumsy like my mother. Yes, I am my mother's daughter.

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Six months we lived on the little island of Fort Monroe. My parents' bedroom window looked out onto the bay and the sound of rushing water was constant; it was the silence. I was seven and had taken to collecting sea glass along the shore. By the end of our time there we had drawers full of glass—browns and greens mostly, a handful of blues and pinks. When winter came, I didn't know snow would blanket the sand, would saddle up and ride the waves like rodeo cowboys. I bundled up and looked for frosted chips of glass in the cold, clumped sand. I stuffed them into my pockets, their edges smooth, their surfaces almost fuzzy. They had been opaqued by decades of movement along the ocean floor. Glass beautified in its travels, refined into something desired, less common; a token of a place, of a memory.



I've always known my mother as a rebel, sensed in her a relentless urge to buck tradition, to tell whomever it was holding her to some preordained standard that they could go fuck themselves. She dropped out of high school and married her first husband at eighteen just to get out of the house. Not for the same reason her own mother had—her family was broken in different ways. My mother's first husband was a quiet man, a mechanic. She hasn't told me much about him, or perhaps there just isn't much to tell, simple as he seemed to be. He was an extra in the movie *Hamburger Hill*, and somewhere Mom still has a picture of him with Tom Cruise on the set of *Born on the Fourth of July*. After a year of marriage she enlisted in the Air Force, and a few years after that they got a divorce. She says when they were married she was restless and immature. She says she broke his heart. With this I understand I am her daughter and I think of the e.e. cummings tattoo on my right arm. I think maybe "[i carry your heart with me(i carry it in my)]" was not at all about a lover but about a mother. That maybe it's her heart I carry and the deepest secret nobody knows, not even me, is that whatever I do is her doing. Maybe she was the small voice in the dark whispering, *There's more than this. Don't get comfortable*, and the loves I ran away from, the men I broke and the homes I left half-empty, were because her heart is there next to mine in syncopated rhythm asking me to be better, to do it right this time.

Mom was stationed in the Philippines when she took up scuba diving in Puerto Galera. When I was a teenager and charm bracelets were in vogue, she gave me a silver charm from her gaudy, Oriental keepsake box. It was a dingy scuba diver in full gear, flippers and arms poised as though propelling itself through the ocean. She told me to take care of it because it was precious, but she wanted me to have it. I lost it after a

couple months and even when I noticed it was gone I didn't give it much thought. I didn't realize it was a relic of the small window between my mother's first husband and my father, the only time she's ever really had to herself. I'm not saying my mother was happy during that time; I'm saying I think she was free. She gave me a token of her independence, a charm to protect like a Catholic saint, to protect me from myself. But I didn't know I would need it. How badly I would one day need to be reminded that I was my own, that I was enough. That I didn't need anyone to tell me I existed for it to be true. Mom never asked about the charm or looked for it on my bracelet, though she usually keeps a close eye on things she or the family gives to me, things of sentimental value. It was like she passed a torch and then hurried to forget the flame, now my burden to bear.

### **Altus AFB, Oklahoma, 2001**

There were no *Buddleja davidii* on Altus Air Force Base, and not many butterflies either as I recall; maybe they despised the Oklahoma heat as much as my mother did. A shallow creek was the dividing line between enlisted and officer housing, the flowers and the trees; we lived on Honeysuckle Avenue. The Altus outside of the base gates was one of Friday night lights and Bulldog pride, smoky restaurants and beauty parlors, white T-shirts and coveralls. We went to church at First Baptist and out for lunch at Subway after, to Hastings for books and movie rentals, and to Moonlight Music for my weekly guitar lesson with Mr. Eddy. In the dry heat from the sun we shared with Texas, I practiced John Denver's "Country Roads" and Patty Loveless' "Chains" in our one-car garage until little calluses formed behind the nails on my left hand. Altus was where Dad bought our purple, hail-dented Kia Sephia with the CD player he fed *Juke Box Jive* on our weekend

drives for snow cones—the stand run by high school girls with long, blond ponytails who looked so different from me at age nine, with my brown everything and belly like the Laughing Buddha, they made me ache long before I finished my tropical ice.

I suspected I wasn't beautiful. Beauty seemed to eat less, take longer to lose its breath, and wear something other than a one-piece to the pool. At the time I thought I wasn't allowed to wear a bikini because they were immodest. We were Southern Baptist, and bikinis rivaled the scandal of VHS tapes rated PG and above, the ones my parents would feel convicted about and, as a consolation, let me smash to pieces in the driveway with a hammer. For my eighth birthday, I got a pink bikini in the mail from my grandparents, and because it was a present I knew I could talk my mother into letting me wear it. When I asked her, she was hesitant as I had anticipated, but she didn't say anything about modesty. Instead, she winced, and said without saying, *You're going to have to learn this the hard way.*

When I got to the base pool the next day I felt beauty radiating from under my cover-up. The bikini. I was there with my father who had set himself up to tan on a plastic folding chair. My mother never came with us, not that I can remember, and I suspect it was because she didn't want her body contrast next to his. Dad's only hobby was exercising. He was lean with defined abs and biceps, and he effortlessly executed the somersault-dive combo off the diving board—the envy of every showboat teenage boy in the place. How easily he caught their attention. Dad would binge on bags of mini Twix and Three Musketeers after dinner each night in front of the television and then run it off the next day. My mother bounced between diets, sneaking fun-size candies from his bags; I can't remember a time when she didn't hate her body. She resented him for how easy he

made it look, for all the dinners she made him that she wasn't allowed to eat, for the way he sculpted his body while she was sharpening her mind and that it didn't matter how many books she read or Styrofoam containers she delivered for Meals On Wheels or how good of mother she was to me, she'd still catch him checking out the tall blond a few lanes down during their bowling league on Tuesday nights—*You see that woman over there? She's exactly your father's type.*

It was a rule to rinse off before getting in the pool, and so I emerged from the ladies' locker room in my new suit with my hair slicked back, Lycra clinging to my chest. My chest, which was not filling out quite as amply as the dark hairs poking out from my bikini bottoms. I sucked in my stomach, creating an unnatural cave beneath my ribcage. I placed a hand at my waist and tried not to accentuate my wide, Latina hips—destined to be referred to as "childbearing." I walked past a table of middle school boys, scrawny and pale with backward caps, drinking cans of Surge from the soda machine. I walked slowly and made eye contact with a boy at the center of the group, the skin at my thighs like Jell-o pudding with each step. He scrunched his nose, and a look of distaste mutated into a wry smile before my plain brown eyes. He turned and laughed with the boy next to him. I looked down at my stomach, which was impeding the view of my thighs, and felt shame hotter than the concrete I scuttled across to the chair where my father was tanning. I covered myself with a towel.

Instead of butterflies, in Altus we caught crawdads, little ones that swam the creek between the flowers and the trees. Our moms netted wire coat hangers with old lace for catching, and when we met at the water it didn't matter whether our dads wore stripes or

bars or stars, or who saluted first. The crawdads were harder to catch; they didn't share the air with us and camouflaged against the slimy rocks, disappeared into the moss and mud. I never liked to touch the things I caught. I wanted to look at them, creatures so different from our dogs and gerbils, from myself, yet still alive and breathing. The satisfaction was in the catching, in seeing the crawdad's armor contrast against pale yellow, pincers snagging at the lace. It was cruel to keep them in tanks the way some of my friends did, the butterflies in jars; maybe not if it was all they'd ever known. But to have an endless world replaced by walls and ceilings and stale, sour air was—still is—to me a tragedy of the highest order.

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When my parents met, they were drunk at the Enlisted Club on Osan Air Base in South Korea. Two months later, they were married and honeymooning in Seoul. Dad was still wounded from a broken engagement to a woman back home in England where he grew up, and Mom's divorce had been final for less than a year. They found companionship in each other, and that was enough for a time. They were stationed apart for a year shortly after they were married. Mom was sent to Hawaii and Dad went back to England.

There's a picture of them on a bed, dating or newlyweds, lying on a plush mink blanket. Dad's hand is lost in her messy brown perm, and they're kissing in a way I've never seen them kiss, in a way I'm not sure they've ever kissed each other since. Two people I have never met. In Hawaii, my mother quit drinking and found Jesus; she quit swearing and the Spirit moved her to speak in tongues. She ran nighttime miles around the lighted flight line to clear her head. My father reconnected with his ex-fiancé and sent my mother a letter he asked her to tear up without opening after a change of heart, which

of course she didn't do. I understand I am my mother's daughter. Self-destructive, curious to a fault, distrusting, and fiercely protective of herself—her heart is a guarded thing and my father will never know it wholly. Over twenty-five years together and still there are still folds of her heart too precious to let him see. Corners so dark I wonder if her god can even know them.

She wanted to leave him early on, but the Bible says if the man wants you to stay, you should stay, and he wasn't ready to let her go. My father would rather be unhappy than alone. She didn't re-enlist and moved to England to be with him. He had no interest in changing, no interest in her newfound religion, and so they existed together.

*Roommates*, she's said. With the way she talks about that time, I'm not quite sure how it happened, but she found out she was pregnant with me. Me, the glue—*After I found out, that was it. I could never take you away from your father*—the chain that bound her to this life, to him.

Mom says they are happy now, together, and I can see that they are. *I love your dad, and I know he loves me. We're good together*, she says. They have their routines and they look out for each other. Mom still hates to cook, but does it anyway because Dad won't make anything that can't be toasted or microwaved. He buys her flowers once a week and leaves her colorful notes on a whiteboard on the side of the fridge every morning before he goes to the gym. This version of them took me a while to get used to because for most of my childhood I could not understand why they didn't just get a divorce. My mother's bitterness toward my dad was palpable, verbalized to me in moments of desperation and weakness from a young age, and if I was to believe the right person for me was out there somewhere, someone who would make me happy and make

me better, then it followed that those people were out there for my parents too.

Sometimes my heart still hurts for them because how could they have known how bad it would get before it got better? And then that hurt turns to fear. How can anyone ever know?

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Skimming the shore for sea glass one gray, November morning, Mom and I found a pair of seagulls caught on two hooks of the same iridescent lure. She sent me back to the house for pliers and when I returned she had me slick one of the bird's wings down tight against its body to hold as she worked the hook from its beak. It thrashed against us, but Mom was able to loose the hook and the bird was left with nothing more than a hole, a little scar for remembering. I released its feathery body onto the sand and it took flight. We continued to work on the second gull, but it didn't fight us like the other one had and was losing a lot of blood. After fifteen minutes of twisting and prying, Mom took up the bird in her slender hands and tossed it onto the rocks, her gold wedding band catching the sunlight over the bay, the gull in total surrender, plastic fish dangling from its mouth.

## Wüsthof Silverpoint II 10-Piece Set

I pulled a knife from the block, my favorite chopping knife with its blunt tip, round and snub-nosed, though I'm not sure anyone else could pick it out by that description, but I always know it when I see it because it's my favorite, with its smooth, black handle and the sharpener, too, in its little hole, and I can hear his voice in my ear like a father but he was my lover, like a bladesmith at his forge, saying, *Keep them sharp or else they're useless*, and showing me the way to hold the sharpener vertically in one hand, its tip pointing up at the pockmarked ceiling of the house we found on Craigslist, with the tip pointing up he held the knife in the other hand, perpendicular to the sharpener, resting the blade against it at the hilt and pulling it toward him then thrusting it forward, over and over again he did this, and the metals together made a *whoosh*, made a *shingg*, the metal shining, catching the yellow kitchen light like a ring would have, like the ring the knives were supposed to be, on my finger, the left hand, the hand I'd use to hold the sharpener, the hand where nothing sparkled even after the words *two years, big gift, something special*; the knives are in a different home now, my home with someone who isn't him, and when I packed my things I wondered if they were mine to take because it never really felt they were for me in the first place, after all did I even care enough to keep them sharp, *Come here and let me show you, When's the last time you sharpened these, Too long, too long, Look how it won't even cut through the skin of this lime, Too long, Watch how I sharpen it, Now it goes right through, see*, and so we made drinks and we talked and I miss those talks where I could say something exactly, or close, and he would understand the thing exactly, or if he didn't, would talk through and around and over and over again until he did, and by the end I knew I understood it better too, and we would



make love against the kitchen counter, on the chaise lounge, on the hood of the car in the open-air garage because the neighbors were old and already asleep; the neighbor, the old man, made hunting knives out of his shed, Damascus steel, sharpened them on a big wheel in the big shed behind his garden, his garden which was so much better than our garden and that summer while I was watering our cherry tomatoes he handed me a basket of cucumbers and I didn't know they would be prickly, that they didn't want to be held by me or the old man or his wife who was in and out of the hospital and never heard us on the hood of the car because she went to bed around eight and her husband shortly after, but he knew how to sharpen a knife and grow a garden and keep a wife for fifty-plus years and I should've asked him how to sharpen a knife because sometimes it's hard to learn from the people we love, and how to grow a garden because the squirrels kept eating my peppers, squirrels with pepper breath, and how to keep a wife for so many years because maybe then I could've told him how to keep me and he never would've asked, *So you really don't think you'll regret this*, and I never would have looked back at him sitting on the green, tweed couch, *If you walk out that door it's over*, and me with one foot out the door saying, *I know*, and then closing the door and driving past the cheese factory that pumped cheddar into the air and the grocery store where we bought things to chop, things that dulled the knives, and then driving back three days later while he was at work and packing everything, including the knives, into a trailer attached to a truck that drove me away from the tweed couch and the spent garden and the love that taught me how to sharpen things.

*Grist*, Spring 2016

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