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## Tourist Trap: On Being Raised In Award-winning Sand

Catherine Jane Carson  
*University of Central Florida*

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TOURIST TRAP:  
ON BEING RAISED IN AWARD-WINNING SAND

by

CATHERINE J. CARSON  
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term  
2007

## ABSTRACT

The literary essays in this collection explore the relationships between mind, body, and environment as the narrator explores Orlando, her beachfront hometown of Sarasota, and other “tourist traps.” The vignettes and traditional and experimental essays here question how residents make popular vacation destinations their own, how newcomers establish themselves as part of local culture, and how much trust one can put in strangers and neighbors, from theme-park designers to lovers.

Dance floors, hybrid bikes, flying elephants, swing sets, and swimming pools fill these pages. Worries spiral like disco lights on dance floors, and cultural forces press down with the regularity of pedal strokes. With the embodiment of place comes connection between environment and activity; music, buildings, landscape, and physical activity heighten the relationship between personal identity and place. Everything moves, but the appeal of tourist traps remains constant.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For the support and encouragement I've received throughout this process, I thank my committee, my family, and my friends.

First, thanks goes to Lisa Roney, who encouraged me to make my own discoveries by asking question after question after question, slipping her interpretation into comments and turning my head to look into the shadows my words cast. She urged me to always explore deeper and find connections where I didn't think any existed. I am incredibly grateful for Lisa's calm in the face of my panic, for her listening, and for her interest, not only in my subject matter, but also in my well-being and in the potential growth of my work.

I owe many thanks to Jocelyn Bartkevicius, who saw me through several nonfiction workshops and read one essay through more incarnations than I can count, always pushing me to condense language and strike the most painful chords I could manage. She led me to explore the grotesque, uncomfortable, and embarrassing, from the dolls I used to play with to my childhood fantasies. She challenged me to reveal the truth behind memory through excavating the artifacts of conversation and objects, even if I wasn't sure what that truth was or if I really wanted to see it.

Thanks goes to Terry Thaxton, who watched my hand shake across the page while I wrote my first imitation of a poem I didn't understand. To Terry, for acknowledging that between line breaks and end-stopped punctuation and alliteration a poem also contains emotion. For telling me that I don't need all those extra words. That, possibly, I might be a poet.

To all of them for reserving their judgment and for respecting me as a student, a writer, and a person. Forever, thanks goes to my parents for keeping up with my progress, supporting my decision to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing, and allowing me to write about them. Thanks goes to Wes for listening even when he didn't know what I was talking about, to Mark and Susan for being part of this process with me, and to Amy and Emily for taking me out to dance away the haunting rhythm of the cursor, perpetually blinking against the white page on the computer screen.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Throughout the writing process, I've toyed with several metaphors to describe the schematic of this essay. For one, I took the central image of the opening essay: a puzzle I played with as a child, made of large, cardboard triangles that fit together to depict a park scene. The seams between puzzle pieces connected diagonally-cut bodies and finished the trajectories of airborne footballs. I used this as a model a few months ago when I had trouble processing exactly what the three major things I was writing about—independent-label music, exercise, physical environments—had to do with each other. Sure, each essay could depict a particular scene, connected to the scenes on either side of it through a similar image or theme, but how could I also pull in what was happening with these three, very different entities? I had three themes. A triangle has three points. I combed back through my essays, and then I saw it. Each involved the body, an environment, and background noise. I made lists of how each of these themes was represented in each essay. This list led me to new essays, from city parks to dark indoor cycling rooms converted from racquetball courts to vacation rentals in the mountains. This led me to connect to the environment, above all connections between essays. Environment and movement would remain central, often related to music and always, at least thematically, related to the surrounding essays.

The model that got me started, even before I wrote the essay with the puzzle, was of a themed record album. My favorite bands write like this, writing titles that thematically relate to every song and including songs from varying styles, often including experimental tracks and sections between songs, that help tell the story of the collection as a whole. Some do this with a



fairly straightforward narrative, but my favorite examples do not. They spiral back to related images and chords, using such triggers to connect the songs beyond logic. Every listen allows for new avenues to unravel the central stories and themes. The songs connect the way memories do, with chord progressions and strumming patterns echoing others the way an unexpected motion with the arm might trigger a memory of swimming as a child that had been stored in the shoulders for years. The truth is not logical, but our culture tries to jam it into sheets of paper, flattening cities to their likenesses on maps. Here, I try to work within the schematic of memory's connection to everyday activities and environments to illuminate those connections, and, when possible draw out logical connections I might find.

What I've seen most of all is that nothing is flat. None of these connections can be made, or a particular model for this structure drawn, in just two dimensions. My best example might be the computer program Google Earth, which uses three-dimensional satellite views to zoom deep into neighborhoods and then zoom out and zip to other neighborhoods countries away in a matter of seconds. The three-dimensional aspect adds a level of reality that a flat map cannot.

Above all, these essays are about stepping out of the grids of maps. They're about riding bicycles along unfinished streets and figuring out how to belong, whether as a tourist in an unknown place, or as a native in tourist land, having been raised in award-winning sand.

## CHAPTER TWO: HOME AND AWAY

### Park Puzzle

Early in elementary school, I spent mornings in my mother's classroom. She taught special ed, and the cabinets beneath the classroom sink were filled with puzzles, games, plastic mats to draw on, and other hands-on teaching implements. My favorite puzzle was made up of isosceles triangles several inches long and wide, and I spread them out on the tile floor to line up the triangles in such a way that they created an entire park scene, complete with kids hanging from monkey bars and pushing each other on swings.

While I didn't realize this back then, this puzzle must have been an exercise in cause-and-effect connection. The corner of one piece featured a child holding a spool of twine with a string angling up into the sky, and another piece fit edge-to-edge with a diagonal line of string leading up to a soaring kite. When the correct cause and effect were matched, the items in the background lined up in a logical order: bushes completed themselves, arms connected to bodies of the same color shirt, and the streams of the central fountain hit appropriate arcs. In the end, the scene of a park full of green grass, a bright blue sky, playing children, and relaxed adults revealed itself. All of this activity—dogs chasing airborne Frisbees, children dangling off of jungle gyms, and kites soaring—took place around a gigantic stone fountain.

I haven't thought about that puzzle in years, but a few months ago, I rode my bike right into the center of a scene just like it. That Sunday, I followed my usual bike route, circling from my thirty-year-old apartment complex, suitable for the very young and very old, through neighboring sub-divisions that featured squat bungalows from an even earlier era with manicured

lawns littered with tricycles. Oak-lined streets narrowed to reveal more and more expensive homes ringed around perfectly round lakes that were, in fact, most likely sinkholes. On my hybrid bike's resilient tires, I bumped along brick roads and nodded to women watering their rose trellises as if I belonged. The last landscape I circled was a planned community on a mat of grass that covered the dirt that used to belong to a Navy base. The knowledge that this was at one point the Navy base divides New Orlando from the Old—old-timers will often reference “the old Navy base” while new-comers will refer to it by its new, idyllic identity.

A wide path snakes through the park at the development's back corner, and this is where I entered. The path winds around a large fountain, swoops by an outdoor track, and nears the basketball courts at the back of a middle school before attaching to the area with all of the houses. Normally, I'd meet a few people walking dogs, a few children playing in the grass or on a swing set, and occasionally pass by a lacrosse game. On that particular Sunday, though, the sky was clear blue, and the park was packed.

Just after I passed the fountain, I noticed a little girl ahead of me crying on the ground while her brother picked her pink bicycle up off of her. He looked up, toward the direction I was headed, and a couple with the kids' dark hair walked toward them without hurry. Looking back toward the children, I saw recognition in the worried boy's face; these were his parents, and their calm would save the day. Behind the kids, boys played tag on the steps of the fountain, and a woman walked slowly by the spouting water, watching it rise into the air.

A small explosion turned me ahead again, and I followed the invisible lines of people's gazes up to a small jet trail in the sky. I followed the trail back down, and there, just a few yards

in front of me, a man and boy crouched over a toy rocket as they prepared to launch another into the sky.

The feeling of uncanniness I had at that moment was unbelievable. With the field of grass to my right and the fountain's spray glinting in the sun, an image of that childhood puzzle overlaid this scene like a transparency. Everywhere I looked, I followed one person's face to a reaction in someone else's—a shout to a child's alerted eyes, a bent-head whisper to another woman's laughter, a young woman's wide smile and clapping hands beckoning a wobbly toddler in the grass—and there was no escaping the web of connection that I pedaled deeper into every second.

A man with a small, gray terrier walked toward me without looking, and, with a family of five dangerously close to my left, he jerked his dog's leash while I swerved to avoid getting clotheslined at the last second. I was part of the puzzle, but not quite. I was being reacted to and passed, but I was not involved. I had no direct relationship with anyone there, contributed no volleys of laughter or conversation or even smiles and waves.

Behind the rocket man, hordes of teenaged boys populated the basketball court, slamming into each other and wiping their mouths with the tails of their long shirts. The whistles I'd heard for miles in the surrounding neighborhoods registered themselves with the girls' lacrosse game in play to my left. A mother pushed a toddler on a swing, a couple sat on a park bench, a man had to navigate his small dog on a long leash and a boy on rollerblades away from my bike's tires. Up ahead, by a bridge that crossed an empty depression, another boy flew a bright red kite, and to his left, across the path, a woman pointed a camera up to the kite's place in the sky.

I carved through the people, half-wishing it would be appropriate to just abandon my bike next to a tree and jump into a game of ultimate Frisbee, like my parents encouraged me to do when I was a kid. I wondered about park etiquette these days—in the interest of safety, did you only play with people you knew, unless you were a child playing with other children? Was this a facade of safety and trust, or was it true, with me missing out because I was so skeptical of it?

I wanted to belong, but I also wanted to observe from the back, like in church as a child or when trying out a new exercise class. But I kept moving, with the purpose I'd entered with: getting some fresh air and connecting with my community and finishing my ride.

Ahead of me, a tree reached toward the other side of the bridge, both arching over the dry drainage ditch. Under the bridge, a couple in wedding wear had their pictures taken. I could either ride up the bridge, where people leaned over the railing, watching the bride and groom below, or I could veer to the left, bypassing a baseball game on a child-sized diamond, and leave all of these people behind. I headed toward the quiet shade on the left, toward the street, and goosebumps pricked my shoulders. I smiled toward the wedding couple, with all the kids in regular cotton play clothes dangling their arms over the rail, the photographer crouched, focusing, the whistles to my left darting toward running ball players with clay-stained knees before they faded behind me, the sound absorbed by the leaves of oak trees being unsuccessfully scaled by kids in flip-flops.

I realized that I had been smiling the whole time I'd been in the park, and a shameful thought hit me like saline into dehydrated veins: I liked this. Not only was everything connected, just like in that puzzle, but this scene felt just as two-dimensional. My bike was real under me, the pedals moving with each press of my legs. I was real. The colors around me were bright—

Technicolor, *Wizard of Oz* bright—and the children were shouting, though I had to listen for this, even though it surrounded me. There were signs of life everywhere, but none of it felt real.

It was too perfect. Too fabricated and planned-out and organized, like the lives of millennial children, like everything we have been taught to do in order to feel on top of our lives. Structure was everywhere, down to the positions of the trees. Structure intended to make this community safe. To make people come outside and meet their neighbors, establishing a real sense of order out of a prescribed sense of order.

And yet something about this order, even though it feels so safe, saddens me. I'm upset that I'm skeptical. I'm upset that I support this planned community by riding through it. That I smile without realizing it.

I called this development not a neighborhood, but a development. The people I spend time with fear the conformity and isolation such planned communities advocate, even as they offer a sense of safety. I much preferred the mismatched bungalows I'd passed to get here, which reminded me of the neighborhood where I'd grown up, based on a blueprint my parents had specified to their needs in a neighborhood without strict restrictions on Christmas lights. My dad decorated the yard with light-up deer and Charlie Brown multi-colored bulbs. No other house looked like ours, and even though my mom had been embarrassed, I'm glad to have experienced such sense of identity now. I was fortunate enough to live on a now-rare, acre lot, in a neighborhood with a motley assortment of houses, one of which dated back some fifty years, and I had the luxury of riding my bike in loops around "the circle" of our cul-de-sac while I imagined my own possibilities for being perfect. My parents drove me to a nearby park on weekends, one with trails of hot monkey bars that burned calluses into my palms.

I biked out of the park and onto one of the freshly paved streets, where I picked up speed. This is a vulnerable time in my life to be affronted with the possibilities of perfection and real estate. Everywhere I go, I shop—for skirts on the girls I see Downtown, for jobs when I visit the offices of friends, for relationships when I see couples sharing small intimacies like sips from cans of Coke. I'm twenty-four years old, and I feel like every day I sink deeper into the couch of my four-year-old self, sure she was going to get married and have children and talk to them like they were adults. I'm grown up in an age where femininity is not so much defined by how girly you are but by how much you can do and how gracefully you wear your sweat while you do it. In that sense, not much has changed since the Fifties besides the footwear and the style of skirt. The new feminists say that this new era is about making my own decisions as to when to break the glass ceiling and when to abandon the ladder all together. Still, I can't help feeling shameful about liking what I saw in the park. The scene speaks to the pictures I pored over in childhood board books and that big puzzle. In them, I recognize an idealistic home with the safe walls of the house my parents planned and the makeshift home my mother created with posters and alphabet magnets in her elementary school classroom. Does seeking the perfection of those pictures mean seeking naïveté, wrapping myself up in a semblance of safety in one of the most violent cities in the country?

I'd called this development the devil when the streets were first opened, without signs to mark the way for visitors. Skeletons of cookie-cutter condos, most empty, had coiled from a sketchy part of town to this more affluent part, and, on my bike no more than five miles from home, I'd gotten lost in the maze for two hours, having to rely on my unreliable mental map for flares of recognition of street names, hoping they would eventually lead me home.

Now, I offer directions to cars headed to the recently-built town center, but I still get lost, sometimes, trying to carve a short-cut through the development by car. On one side of me lies an empty grass field. The other side is flanked first by parallel-parked cars and then by towering Colonial-style rectangular homes, red shutters nailed wide open.

A friend of mine, in an environment-themed college seminar, had conducted research back when construction began (before the mat of fresh sod had been rolled in) that suggested the land was contaminated with mercury, though apparently not enough to prevent building. The lots were being sold for far more than they were worth, and the stacked-and-glued-together town homes offer no room for creative adjustment. People pay for the convenience of the location and the idea of living in this community. The idea of a Colonial era, which is where the style of these town homes belonged. What about the Florida bungalow or Spanish tile roof? Planting Colonials in Florida seems as much a violation to Florida architecture as the entrance of kudzu to Georgia foliage.

I picked up speed toward the lake where I would turn to head home to my apartment, in a complex smaller than this but with buildings just as alike to each other, though a few decades older. Was I a hypocrite? With my income, I didn't have the choice of living in my own house. The major difference between this and that was the sense that my present home is temporary. Also, it doesn't have a counterpart, a carbon copy, like these planned neighborhoods. It may not be home forever, but it's home for now. And, in the meantime, I've got other neighborhoods to ride in, other lives to window-shop.

The puzzle was real, so many years ago, even if the characters playing in it weren't. And this park had unfolded and spread itself flat like that puzzle, each triangle revealing a little bit



more until it all fit together in one giant triangle and the seams dissolved. I used to make up stories about all two-dimensional characters, giving them names based on the other students in my class. At the park, I just felt like I automatically read the people. Maybe assumptions like that are dangerous. But maybe they also help anxiety-prone people like me navigate through the hazards of our worries. Two-dimensions may be boring, but they're much easier to navigate than three.

We all go through different stages with different buildings to house our changes: middle school with its big, iron fence, high school enclosed like a shopping mall, shoe-box dorm rooms, L-shaped apartments with corridor kitchens and offices transformed from janitorial closets and cubicles decorated with smiling faces that fit flat into frames and rectangular pieces of paper lined with box-confined letters that contain all the elements of stress to be handled on a particular day. The elementary thought that, in graduate school, I still have trouble conceptualizing, is that people *live* in these shoebox-shaped rooms. I've lived in them, too.

I ride past the houses again. Past an old convenience store, past a lot filled with cars waiting for their drivers to come out of church. My ability to ride on weekends is the result of urbanization. My ability to ride here is because of Orlandoization. Pride and anger mix together here, and I'm happy to exchange a smile with a three-mile neighbor about sharing and using our environment, but at the same time I'm saddened that as a child I rode my bike on evenings thick with cricket song without ever wondering if I'd one day treasure the ability to do so.

I could savor this now. I could admit that one day these planned parks, too, might be gone. That one day the air might not be safe enough to breathe without masks. I could cry with every ride instead of ever leaving and returning home with only a sunburn and sore muscles to

remind me I'd gone for a ride because, overwhelmed with cars and daytime air, my mind had divided and skipped off into its own unmemorable landscapes. I could focus on every flower and leaf and cloud. But that would admit defeat. A moment worth holding tight can't be forced. While savoring might highlight some moments, it doesn't make them nearly as memorable as those that grab you, yanking you from one rote activity into another from the past that you'd tucked away into the tiny banks in the fibers of your muscles and the mirrors in the backs of your eyes. Joni Mitchell said, "You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone," but I don't want to live feeling like everything I've got is going to, one day, be gone. I'd rather ride like always, letting the past overlay the present, smiling without noticing, re-landscaping rich people's yards with my eyes.



## Plastic Skin

When I was seven years old, I decided that I was meant to be alone. That must have been the reason that Mom had Dad and that my half-siblings, Sara, David, and Ruth, had each other. That Sara had her boyfriend Ted and Ruth had her boyfriend Bill. That our cats, Ebony and Onyx, could chase each other through the house and then sleep coiled in each other's tails. Time with my friends was limited because we lived across town from the neighborhoods bordering the schools, and while my parents enjoyed the quiet of being home after a long day teaching school, I craved noise and the comfort of business it provided.

Before I discovered TV as a child, with its constant thrum of audience laughter and dialogue and music, I filled evening and weekend hours playing with my dolls. My favorite doll was named Megan, after my baby sister who'd died at birth. The doll had one brown eye and one white eye because I'd accidentally popped out the iris and lost it in the carpet soon after receiving her. When my dad brought her home from a garage sale when I was four, just months after the real Megan's death, she was heavy. Her legs smacked me in the bottom and thighs when I carried her through the house. Her arms banged against my back and belly and her head bounced against my cheekbone. I had to move carefully to avoid much pain.

When I was older, I marked my Megan doll's right wrist with a pink highlighter to Band-aid up, but I regretted it as soon as I tried to wipe it away and found that it was permanent. I suited her in cheap Huggies diapers and always carried at least two extras in a pink diaper bag I'd spent twenty minutes choosing from the back of the baby section in Wal-Mart. Her fingers were curled, except for the pointer, which stuck out a little, naturally, and I loved the detail of her

knuckles, often comparing the lines marking places where our fingers bent. Sometimes I took her pointer finger between my lips and teeth to better feel every bump, the way my mother used to pretend to bite off my fingers and then, when she caught them, hold them in her mouth for a second at the top knuckle. I wanted to memorize her. Her skin was such a soft plastic I could almost feel velveteen, human hairs on its surface when I grazed the crown of her head with my chin.

Her body was a white cloth sack, and through the years the stuffing where cloth met plastic for arms, legs, and neck, wore away, making her more apt to smack me if I ran with her. When I pushed her in a pink plastic stroller across the tile floor, her eyelids rattled as they snapped open and shut.

Even though my sister Megan died before she lived, my dolls were alive to me in plastic skin. They lived perpetual lives in dollhood, even though in my mind, my sister grew a little each year.

As I grew, carrying my Megan doll got easier. I fed her invisible formula from bottles originally intended for my sister, and I pinched the bottles' rubber nipples so they fit perfectly between my doll's slightly parted lips. She got belted into the back seat of the car. She rode in the front of grocery carts, legs dangling, and women who only saw her from the back would compliment Mom and me on the cute baby until they saw her eye. Shock turned to relief through laughter when they realized she was just a doll. Mom would laugh along with them, but her face was a little too red. Her laugh carried tension, and when I laughed, my throat held some of it, too. We could keep our stories hidden in our polite laughter, our red faces disguised for mild embarrassment behind our crinkled eyes and wide smiles.

On weekends, my house became a virtual town, with my bedroom home, the playroom school, the kitchen the school cafeteria, the living room a community pool, and the den a doctor's office. I played both Mom and over-responsible big sister when I carried Megan and dragged her three-foot-tall, curly-haired plastic sister Carrie by hand and a fistful of hair through the house to swimming lessons and appointments, playing mother, teacher, cook, swimming instructor, and doctor. Those were full days.

I was not an unhappy child. This reasoning that I was meant to be alone, that I was meant to shoulder some burden that others were not able to understand or handle themselves, helped resolve me to my aloneness. Sure, I had friends, and my mother sometimes sat down on the floor with me and my Barbies on weekends, and my much older sister Sara often scooped me up for weekends at her house. But if, on a hot and boring Saturday, I couldn't reach a friend because she was spending the day with someone else, I took the edge off the hurt by telling myself that it was meant to be this way, that God had a reason for everything.

I couldn't talk about these things. I couldn't talk about feeling responsible for my sister's infant death. For feeling survivor's guilt. I didn't want to upset Mom, and I had no words for these feelings, anyway. All I had were photo albums, which I flipped through every night when I was in second grade. In the pages where vertical lines of adhesive browned from corner to corner, I tried to find some answer for the burn I knew could only be nostalgia.

I filled the hour between bath and bed crying over a blue photo album filled with pictures taken at our old house on Melody Circle, which I was forgetting even though we'd only moved across town two years before. I leaned against my bedroom wall, grounded by carpet biting into

my thighs, plastic pages of photographs spread across my knees. The opening credits of sitcoms that came on past my bath time echoed through the house while I cried, trying to insert my sister into the album's glossy pages of pictures. Each picture held some memory I knew I didn't feel wholly, like the picture of our two cats sleeping on a top closet shelf, their black and white legs and tails dangling down among forgotten coats and belts. I remembered the cats draping themselves over the backs of chairs and tangling into each other, but I'd never caught them in the closet like my mom had when she had taken the picture. This was my mother's memory, not mine. It was just a leftover picture stuck inside a navy blue binder marked plainly *Album* and given to me.

There were pictures of me as a newborn, fat and dark-haired. I swore they were pictures of someone else's boy baby, not me, a girl with long blond hair. And there were shots that showed the T-shirt wallpaper that used to cover my old bedroom—*that* I remembered. I just didn't quite understand why we'd moved; we'd gone from a house filled with brown carpet and paneling to a house filled with windows and white. The nostalgia I felt was for a place and knowledge that I didn't even really know, from a perspective that was not my own. I'd just accepted my reality as it was, without wondering what had broken my siblings' parents up or why my brother was there more often than my sisters—it turned out that he'd lived with us for a year. It may have taken our move across town and my entrance into the routine of school for me to question why things were the way they were.

These photos were my mother's memories the same way the picture I'd found of Megan was. I'd found it in a drawer below the TV in their bedroom while I watched a chain of sitcoms from the '70s one night. With a television laugh track in the background, I made my way

through my parents' drawers, trying to find the trinkets and books and journals that made them adults and me a child. In the same drawer as the picture, I came across a little gold cross embossed with a child praying. It must have been the Megan drawer. I was surprised the picture wasn't in a frame and that it was so simple, just like any other snapshot stashed in a drawer and forgotten. But even at six I knew there was gravity to this, that looking at a picture of a dead baby should not be so easy.

In the photo she was just another pink baby wrapped in a white blanket, covered in a pink-striped stocking cap as if any heat could actually escape her head. Crimson lips made her skin even more pale than it already was. That was it.

I made pulling the photo out while I watched TV a nightly ritual. I don't know what I was looking for, but I think I wanted to know what separated her from me. Perhaps I was jealous that this picture wasn't in my album, that any time I tried to imagine her, it would either have to be based off of pure imagination or a projection of the future based on this picture—my parents' memories immortalized in a dead baby dressed as if she were alive.

Now I realize there may be links between seeing this picture and dressing my own dolls in sweaters and hats in cool weather. After all, they couldn't feel temperature or wind or rain in their plastic skins. My childhood play webbed itself with the realities of the memories I held and the memories I imagined. My mother, though, never questioned my need to drag my Megan doll all around town as we ran errands. She encouraged me to learn about appropriate clothing for appropriate weather that way, asking if my baby would be cold if I took her out without a sweater. Neither she nor my father said anything about my requests to prop her up in my old



wooden high chair and seat her next to the table when we ate. As soon as I did so one night, I knew that something was wrong. The plastic body slumped against the ledge of the high chair looked ridiculous. My actual sister should have occupied the chair next to Mom or Dad. If she had been there, my place probably wouldn't have been at the head of the table. My perception of dinner would have been completely different, as I would have had to learn to hold my elbows in while cutting my steak so I wouldn't hit the person next to me. Instead of facing the china cabinet, I would have faced another member of my family. Instead of having parents on either side of me, one side of me would have been cold and unwatched.

After that night, I fed my dolls plastic bananas in my room before dinner.

What I really want to know now, since twenty years have passed between those moments and where I am today, is whether my mother ever forgot that my doll was a placeholder for my sister. I forgot, even though the two shared a name. And, as far as I can recall, my mother always called her my Megan doll, a constant reminder that the identity of this doll was separated from the identity of a person. With time, do our constructions of actual events mold themselves around memories and trauma the way tree trunks grow around barbed wire?

My Megan doll's white eye was a placeholder for a missing brown iris, but after a few months of playing with her sans iris, I forgot that it was missing. I either saw and dismissed it or just filled it in my mind. Meeting the students in my mothers' special-ed class worked the same way; the initial meeting of a child with Down's Syndrome was a shock, and I immediately searched his features for what made him different. But after a week in my mother's classroom, spending elementary school mornings there while the kids trickled in, I forgot to notice the differences between them and me. Each child was just him or herself, distinguishable for his or

her physical features and personality traits by his or her name. Charlie was the one who called me “Girl.” Carrie stood on her toes and jumped when I said hello to her. Michelle and I read to each other on the corduroy couch.

In this same pattern, my perception of my sister went from a physical presence to a doll I could care for to a longing for a connection to my parents through memory of this event. From there, it deepened in ways I wasn’t aware of, driving my sense of perfectionism as I took on the pressure of being two children—both myself and the daughter my parents had lost.

I was three when my mother was pregnant, and my only memory of that time is of trying to choose Megan’s name. I sat in some small doctor’s office with both my parents while Mom sifted through names in a baby book. It was close to the date, and they still hadn’t chosen a name they both liked, something between serious and old-fashioned. As she went down the list, Dad vetoed and made nervous jokes, commenting on who the person with each name would end up being later. I’d wanted to be the one to think of the perfect name but had nothing to offer.

When I remembered this moment after finding the photograph and doing a lot of thinking, I was thrilled to tell Mom, hoping we’d share the memory. She might laugh or cry or look at me like she never imagined I’d remember. Whatever her reaction, we’d have shared this memory. I’d be a part of this event that people rarely mentioned.

Instead, she told me that had never happened. Maybe I’d told it wrong, saying it must have happened right before she went to labor, mixing the chronology up, so I tried again.

“No,” she said. “You probably got the idea from that *Ramona* movie you like to watch.” In my favorite one, Ramona’s parents tried to choose a name for her little sister. I thought about

that, and I couldn't separate the scenes from the movie from my own life. I just wanted to be involved. I'd been at my grandparents' house during the birth—I'd been absent during the single most important event of my life.

Every once in a while, Mom casually mentioned her pregnancy when remembering some event, like one evening when I dragged her to the floor with me and pointed to the pictures of Dad and me riding the flying elephants of Dumbo at Disney World, saying, "Remember this?"

"We waited for two-and-a-half hours for you to ride Dumbo," she said. "It was hot, I was pregnant, and I ended up just waiting on a bench while you two stood in line."

"I'm sorry," I said. Two hours was a long time to wait in the summer heat. I didn't remember that. The little blue elephant's skin glared white in the sunlight, and I remembered how the heat of its side burned my palm when I patted its cheek. My stomach had lifted when we went into the air, and Dad had lifted one arm and said, "Whee." He'd pointed out Mom below, but by the time I thought I saw her, she was gone again, and I couldn't stop looking at the plastic castle in the distance where we'd eaten lunch and I'd noticed holes in Cinderella's gloves. I didn't remember Mom being pregnant, just that she'd never liked rides. I hadn't meant to remind her.

"Don't be sorry," she said. "There was nothing else to do there."

A few days after this discussion, I was at my six-year-old next-door neighbor's house, talking about her upcoming trip to Disney World while we played paper dolls. "I went once," I said. "My mom waited two-and-a-half hours in the hot sun while she was pregnant so I could ride Dumbo."

“Pregnant?” she asked. “You don’t have any little sisters or brothers.”

“Yeah, she was pregnant with my—” I froze. I’d been so proud to know something of my family’s history that I’d let it slip out, not realizing what I’d have to explain. The pregnancy was a fact, just as was the death, only the death was not evident.

“Wait. Pregnant? I don’t know what I’m talking about. I must be mixed up.” I laughed it off, but my face was hot. I could keep our secret, if nothing else.

When my mother had left my room one night as I flipped through the album and cried, hoping I’d come to my senses while she cleaned the kitchen, I sat behind my closed door and prayed the way we had in church, thinking there must have been a reason my sister Megan was not there. I envisioned horrible things that could have happened to her that only God knew about, like a car accident when she was sixteen and ripped from us after everyone had fallen in love with her, since people had told us we were lucky not to have known her longer before she’d gone. What if, in the future, I caused her death, driving her into another car on the highway or fighting with her before she got in the car alone, angry, and unfit to drive? Maybe God was giving us this hurt to spare us that. I imagined her being like one of the students from my parents’ classes, bound to a wheelchair and slurring her speech. That didn’t make sense, though; if anyone could embrace a mentally and physically handicapped child, my parents could. I could only reconcile myself to thinking that what might have happened to her had she lived would have been much worse than anything I could imagine. God just hadn’t been able to make up his mind until the last second.

Someone must have told me that everything happened for a reason. Maybe it was the ideology from all those what-to-expect children's books that taught kids to love their siblings whether they were boys or girls. I went to a Mennonite preschool, and maybe they'd told me something to that effect; a note from them that my mother had saved through the years explained that I'd walked into preschool one day and said, "My sister is with baby Jesus." Coming across this note when I was a teenager shocked me. I'd never called Jesus a baby, except when singing a Christmas carol. But on those nights of childhood crying over photo albums, after I'd failed to imagine why my sister had died, I reconciled myself with thoughts of her charming God with her laugh and dimples and then sledding belly-down sugary hills with my grandmother, who'd passed away when I was two.

Mom watched, bewildered, as I went through my album night after night, certain I was going through some hormonal shift way too early. I couldn't tell her that Megan was bothering me, though. I saw how upset she got around Megan's birthday, when Dad told me not to bother her. I looked through these pictures of Christmases and Easters when I sat on my oldest sister, Ruth's, lap for a sense of a real, full family, for togetherness, for something I saw in the manufactured families on TV, for a feeling I still can't articulate years later, probably because it doesn't exist.

By the time I grew too old to play with dolls, I'd almost forgotten how the Megan doll had gotten her name. The character of my imagined sister had been so engrained into the plastic face of my doll that it took our yearly tree planting in my sister's honor for me to remember what all the big-sister play was all about. When I got too old to play with dolls and it was time to

dress my Megan doll in her blue pajamas and set her on the closet shelf, I missed her. Instead, I narrated my days in my head for the girl I could imagine had grown with me when the doll could not.

I remember some of these imagined moments as clearly as if they were actual events and conversations. After dinner with my parents to celebrate Mom's birthday at a Japanese steakhouse when I was nine, I sat on the driver's side of the car, behind Dad, even though he would move the seat back because I knew what would happen as soon as Mom sat down. She leaned her seat back, dropped her head, and snored.

There was just enough room for Megan's legs, since she was smaller than me. *Mo-om*, she whined, even though the seat back wasn't quite touching her legs.

Only it was my voice, whining for her. "What?" Mom said. Not even "Quit your bellyaching." Not a laugh, not even a criticism.

"You can't go to sleep. You have to keep me company while Dad drives." I was hopped-up on Coke, and I couldn't understand how she was not as awake as me.

"Let her sleep," Dad said.

I slumped back and smacked my head against the headrest. I hated it when Mom just fell asleep like this. Megan rolled her eyes, almost laughing out loud. And then we giggled and kicked, and she was absolutely beautiful with her brown braid like Ruth's and my old Mickey Mouse shirt with the holographic eyes and her dimple that was just a little deeper than mine.

Dad didn't like music in the car while he drove. He yawned, but he did not sleep. Because he drank more than she did, I wondered if he would keep the car on the road. He

always did. I wouldn't have been able to drive myself, anyway, so there was no reason to worry about it. My mind filled with the bells of our laughter.

But then the magic faded. The seat next to me turned cold. To fill it, I lay down and watch the stars soar by through the top of the window. I imagined being watched by them. They whispered to each other to watch out for the car and make sure we get home.

Eyes closed, I guessed we were, how many stop signs from the house. I kept myself awake with what I would do when I got there—brush teeth, pull back sheets, face the shadows of my closet wall in my well-lit room, and sleep.

Megan tickled my feet, and I kicked her away, saying, *You know, we're going to have to brush our teeth and go to bed when we get home. Calm down.* She just laughed, even though it wasn't funny anymore. *I'm serious. And don't wake Mom up.*

At home, Mom bee-lined for bed and Dad made for the bathroom. On my side of the house, I brushed my teeth and changed into my sleep shirt. I imagined being named Jennifer, a popular name for a popular girl.

To the left of the bathroom was the guest bedroom with blue-covered twin beds. *Time for bed,* I tell Megan. *School's early tomorrow.* Her room would have had stuffed animals all over the floor and flowers on the walls. I would have tucked her in. Maybe I would have lain with her a second. Maybe just told her to get out of my hair.

But the normal life of sisters was not mine.

She lingered in her doorway with that expression that warned me she could still burst with laughter. I gave in. *Come on, but be quiet.*

In my room with flowered walls, I turned the light on as usual and faced the closet so I could see shadows of intruders in the doorway. *Go to sleep*, I said, putting my arm around her to keep her still. *Can't sleep with the light on*, she said.

If Mom was asleep, no one would turn off my light. What would be worse—trying to fall asleep with the light off or waking up to find that no one had turned it off?

*Stay here*. I walked across the room and leapt back to bed before monsters behind the dust ruffle yanked me down by the ankles.

*Made it*, she said.

*Shh*. But I smiled and pulled her close so the room could warm up.

My ghost of a sister was also there when we planted the trees in her honor in the backyard. Dad told me to hold the hose. I had to dig. I had to help stamp the dirt down. I had to be very involved. I liked that Mom and Dad planted things for her. I thought it was pretty and appropriate and nice that she might not be discussed, but she was not forgotten (even though we haven't kept up this tradition every year since my childhood), nice though haunting that my mother still marked her birthday on the calendar.

To help me be brave, to help me play this off as casual, something every kid does on a November dusk, Megan laughed at me from the leaves of the tiny magnolia tree, *her* tree, the first planted for her. At the roots of this tree, hamsters and rabbits and cats will be buried. At least one blossom will come up a year. She crouched up there, looked down at us, and laughed. *You don't know what you're missing*. We said it to each other, at the same time, without words.

Then she just watched.



And I narrated, just in case she missed something.

The dirt felt like any other dirt around any other plant's roots. The water spilling from the hose to my legs was like any water. The mosquitoes didn't know we were planting this bush in her honor.

We planted gardenias in the outside corner of the porch, on the other side of the screen from the hot tub. By the end of the summer, Dad had to replant them because Mom was so allergic she couldn't step onto the porch without crying.

It's a shame that gardenias have such a pretty smell. The smell of a ghost, in her own skirt of white petals.

## Stars Over a Mountain West of Asheville

My parents and I took vacations to the beach and the mountains. We lived a half hour's drive from Siesta Key, and my older sisters were always deep brown and freckled from mornings spent in the sun. In the spring, my parents and I headed to North Carolina, where a relative of my sister's husband kept a cabin. Dad admired the wood—wood floors, wood walls, wood ceilings. Mom stocked the cabinets with food from the Piggly Wiggly, and I imagined who'd slept in the rooms before us.

The cold up there was foreign to me, just as the pull of gravity on the back of the Honda as we drove up the mountain was for my parents. After we'd settled in, Dad and I leaned against the steep ledge that cut over the house, and I clawed my way up the red dirt, trying to keep as clean as possible. At the top, we wove our way through trees, bracing ourselves against the bases of their trunks. Dad noted the fluorescent tags marking some of them, telling me to remember that this one marked the entrance to a clearing as empty as a kitchen sink.

I wanted to live in that clearing. I wanted to grow up in that cabin and wear a pink cotton skirt and scale that ledge like it was a third leg to rest upon, and I wanted to know that every night I could retreat here while Mom cooked dinner so that I could watch the trees' branches and listen to the wind and revel in the carpet of dead leaves. I automatically knew the conversations I would have there with friends. I would have conversations about nothing, only we would never say that we spoke of nothing. In all that nature, what the trees heard wouldn't matter. I'd have a quiet place to cry when I needed to, a place to get lost, a place where only I knew my way, a place to take for granted.

Dad and I scoured the mountain, and I usually took the downward slopes too fast, wrapping my wrists around skinny tree trunks to break my speed on the way down. We walked for hours, Dad pointing out hollows where bears might live in the winter. Smoke drifted from chimneys and trailers below; this neighborhood wasn't like ours in Florida. Here, the houses were hidden, painted colors that blended into the trees, and trailers dotted the road side. No peach or pink houses here. Even the smoke smelled like the woods.

After a few days, I would be allowed out on my own. I was probably more nervous about this than my parents. I kept quiet as I could, listening for the cracking of sticks, the crunching of leaves. I marked my way in my head, didn't ever go where I hadn't been before, painted the landscape bigger and newer in my mind. I saw myself as an explorer, a Laura Ingalls Wilder, contented my spirit for adventure with that. In the suburban world of the '90s, Polly Klaas's body had just been found. A police officer doing drug awareness and prevention at our school had told us that girl was eleven and had gone off with a stranger. That was all I needed to know. Afterward, Mom had wanted me to watch *Oprah* with her—some expert was going to show kids how to outsmart attackers—but I refused. I couldn't watch that, let it be a possibility. Instead, I watched kids wrestle away from criminals on other TV shows. I tangled wire hangers on my doorknob as an alarm and fell asleep with the light on, facing the shadows on my white closet door, with my window in my peripheral vision, even though I was eleven and I knew I should be too old for such things.

My parents let me go into the woods because they knew I wouldn't go far. I think they knew I was scared. I scared myself more than anything else. I made my way to the clearing, not jogging as fast as I had with Dad. I made just enough noise to scare away animals. At the

clearing, I walked in a circle. I got dizzy looking up into their leaves, shaking hands in the wind. Leaves rustled behind me, and I turned around to see several brown leaves fall lightly to the ground. I squinted into the woods to the right. Could a man be skinny enough to hide behind a tree? I ran zig-zag down the half-overgrown mountain path, using tree trunks as brakes. Anger drove me down hill. I knew I shouldn't have to be afraid.

Mom went running and reported on some of the odd mountain people she met, people who stared, a *what the hell are you doing?* look on their faces. I went with her after the story of the woman staring at her. "Be careful," I said.

I made it up the side of the mountain alone and sat in the clay in my jeans. Below me, the roof of the house was dirty. I could have thrown a clump of red clay at it, marked it. I could have jumped and fallen into the wooden net of shingles. I liked that I could sit above the house, looking down on the smoke coming down from the chimney. I liked that the roof could break a fall.

I wanted to make an exact arc up and down that crest, like a rainbow over the side of the cabin. I'd only gone up and down the one side before. I started to scoot, looking out for copperheads and loose rocks. I turned over to my stomach and tried to make my way down that way, like a rock climber, but this clay was too soft for that, making me skid. I felt like I was stories above the flat shelf below, where the house stood, when I was probably only about a hundred feet. Felt in danger of flying and smacking straight into a wooden wall. I had to eventually get up and make my way back to the top and down the way I came. As I started to come down, Mom came out onto the tiny back porch and looked up but didn't see me. She called out my name, just the way she would at home if I was on the swing set or my bike. The

sound splintered against the rock, and fragments flew everywhere, some to me, some zooming over my head and getting swallowed by the waving tops of trees. I could live here. I could belong in the woods. Except that I am too scared of snakes and predators and men and people to ever enjoy it, to ever have fun.

“Right here,” I said into the blue darkness. I made my slow way down the way I’d gone up, wishing I could just jump. After dinner and dessert peaches, when it was dark, Dad and I sat on a picnic table, looking at the stars. That slope over the house didn’t look nearly as high as it had when I’d been perched on it. I didn’t see how I couldn’t make my way down the other side.

From our shelf high above hundreds of trees, with still hundreds more on different shelves over our heads, we had a clear view of the stars. At home, I’d watched the stars from the swing set in our back yard, rocking in the old swing and listening to my sneakers scratch the dirt. At home, the neighbor’s security light fogged out most of the stars. It illuminated the bugs that flew near it and the circle of ground below it, where the action was supposed to be. From the top of the picnic table, I squinted to pick out blue and red and yellow stars, trying to see which were about to die, which had just been born, and which were the souls of dead people and animals. I mapped out soap operas just for them.

It was a sneeze. The flick of an ember. A silver star glowing bright and launching and then dimming. Less than a second.

“Did you see that?” Dad asked.

“Yes,” I said, putting on my most bored voice.

“Have you ever seen a shooting star?”

“Yes.”

“They’re rare.” He turned toward the house, where Mom was washing dishes. “I wish Mom was out here. She should have seen that.”

I swallowed. I didn’t want that to be a *moment*. I didn’t want seeing the shooting star together to be special. I wanted shooting stars to be ordinary. I wanted that to be life always, except that I wanted to be coupled, too, just like Mom and Dad, and I wanted us all to watch a show of shooting stars and know that we were all special because we’d decided to go out and see them rather than stay inside and watch TV. Such events could be happening all the time and always would, for anyone who wanted to see.

All Dad wanted me to do was acknowledge this was important. My thoughts were far ahead, connecting lines between the stars. My thoughts involved God and hope and my sister, seven years stillborn, blowing us a kiss from heaven.

Mom came outside, and Dad told her about the star. If she didn’t say “Megan’s watching us,” the words were in her eyes. This thought made me shiver because I was thinking it, too. Because these things sound sappy even if they’re honestly the first thoughts that pop into your head. Even if you know other people are feeling them, too.

There are other thoughts like this. *I just want to be married and live in my own house with my own kids and embarrass them with sappy remarks about shooting stars.* Scare them with the implication that these moments are important because they will not always be ours to share. I don’t want to walk into the woods for the rest of my life with a sense of fear or impending nostalgia for some important experience I’ll surely lose, never to be replicated.

I told my dad I'd seen a shooting star before, and that was the truth. But this is the only shooting star I ever remember seeing.

Now I live in a city where theme parks spend millions of dollars to replicate rain forests and build imaginary towns. I live in an apartment I like, with a big window and lots of oaks outside. Apartments like this are rare. Every time the people above me walk, I want a house. I want them to have a house of their own, too. I want a house and a yard and my pets and a husband and some kids. I want a grill and a picnic table and a blanket of night. I want the safety to open the windows at night. I don't want the neighborhood I grew up in, the family I grew up in, to be a luxury.

I used to run alone, even in the woods behind campus, where an old man once got lost for three days. I tested my limits for feeling safe and decided, sadly, that the anxiety wasn't worth the company of trees. It's been decades since poor Polly, since that first big scare, and now these things are no less heinous, but seem much less rare. I'm still afraid of people. I'm afraid of what they'll do to me if I make them mad. I've seen things in this city—a man holding a woman upside down in a parking lot at 8:00 a.m. on a Sunday, a man close behind a woman on the unlit side of an SUV as I made my way through another parking lot to a restaurant at 7:00 on a Tuesday night. I didn't look long enough to see more, just hit the gas and avoided crashing into another car as I sped through the four-way stop dividing sections of the parking lot. I cried into my cell phone to the person I was going to meet and said, "I am *not* eating here." He met me back at his apartment complex's parking lot. He left his car running while he hugged me, door

open wide, light pouring onto the asphalt. I shook but couldn't explain what I'd seen. Just that I'd known to gas it. Just that I'd known I was where I shouldn't be right then.

I'm afraid to be mad myself, to incite any anger. So I let the anger build up the pressure of my blood. I get mad and my temperature rises, I get mad and cry, I get mad and sick, glued to the couch in front of the TV for days.

I just took up watching the news. It scares me. Makes me not believe these trees are real, that I'm safe going outside to do my laundry, that I live here.

At the university, I'm just another person climbing stairs.

Shooting stars put on a show every night, a show we replicate on the dark dance floors of clubs and with the soft strobe lights of our TVs.

I still want to remember every shooting star I see.

I can't see the stars in this city. I don't miss them, though, unless I catch a cluster of them somewhere else. Then I remember that I once saw a star burn out in the night. That's what it takes for me to realize what I'm missing.



## Carving Through Hills

At Papa's house I'm torn between thinking of big things and little: the president, the war, the size of my ass, how much I look like my mother when I balance a cup of coffee on my crossed knee, or how much I look like the grandmother I don't remember when I sip one of Papa's memory-killer martinis from a gin glass.

Probably not much—I drink too fast for the image of me-with-glass to stick.

Papa's always got a parable, and I try really hard to listen. During the Depression, he raised a steer and then his father butchered it. He and his father pulled its meat on a wagon from one house to the next until that steer was gone, and Papa didn't understand why he didn't see a dime.

He doesn't want the man in the yarmulke to win *Jeopardy!*. Buying DVD's is a waste of money. Having a plasma TV, though, is not.

We watch the news, and he says, "I feel sorry for your generation. I'm glad I won't be around when the war comes here." If there was more, I can't write the rest. I saw glimpses from the worst war movies, before I'd turned my head: bodies everywhere, blood on the lens, legs aching from running and crouching, no house to keep your clothes in, nothing but the clothes on your back, the sturdiest, not the trendiest, the most likely to survive.

He's seen war, knows things I can't guess. I take my bike to the state park behind his back yard. The park had once been visible from the back porch of the house, a curtain of trees in front of the cold cement stage. Now that they've turned the porch into a second living room, this

view is only available through the slotted angles of salmon vertical lines slicing up two windows, and even from there, the gazebo blocks the view.

Dad and I used to duck under the barbed wire fence and walk through the woods to the park's paved roads, the bed of ashes at the campground, the rusted rectangular jungle gym. I'd tilt my head all the way back to see the tops of the trees and get dizzy. I'd step quietly as I could through the leaves so I wouldn't disturb the birds or deer, and then I'd remember about snakes and stomp a few feet to scare them away.

Now, visiting my grandparents alone, as good young adults do, I ride my bike to the legal entrance of the park and tell the guard I'm just riding through. He nods me in, and I'm surprised he doesn't give me a more surprised look in this tiny, old city. On this paved road, I hit my first hills ever. That's the thing about North Florida—there's elevation, movement in the earth. Nothing seems to be moving in this town but the hills.

Two cars pass slowly. Afterward, the rushing wind speeds my heart with memories of suburban traffic, where I usually ride, but when I do a split-second glance behind, I see nothing but asphalt and trees.

Again, I lift my chin to see the tops, but the glance doesn't quite make it. I'd rather not fall.

I'm drunk on wind, high on downhill speed, full of more oxygen than my body's known in years. At the bottom of the first hill, the trees talk, filled with crickets and gossiping birds. This constant movement could mean everything—keep pedaling and you won't fall down.

Even busy with the physical world, my worries nag. If war comes here, with all its abstract fury made real, will the woods still exist? Will this, a bike ride instead of a picket line, be considered time wasted?

I comfort myself. I'll bet he didn't think of war when my first grandmother was dying. I'll bet he didn't think of Iran or some economic crisis. I'll bet he thought about her, measured the thinning of her wrists with his eyes. Lifted me, diapered and fascinated by the rainbows from the garden hose, to her arms in an effort to motivate her to live just a little longer, if not for him or for their daughter then for me.

I ask for a tour of the town, and he sits in the passenger seat to guide me through the sanitarium where Nana went to treatment for TB and where my mother worked long after that, with the special kids, before we go to the prison. He makes me drive past the crepe myrtles and open steel gates and past tall fences curled over in barbed wire, right up to the door. "This is where you'll go if you do something wrong," he says, and I can't tell if he's kidding or not. I've never really done anything wrong. Not anything terrible anyway. I nod and drive back up the unpaved road carefully so as not to anger anyone.

Nana's pictures hide in photo albums and wooden drawers, her skin loose and dark toward the end. Everyone in our family is a little anorexic, just a tad congested in the heart.

I pump up another small hill and glide down around a curve into a pocket of cold air. Goosebumps tingle my shoulders, and my eyes sting behind my sunglasses. It could rain, and I'd be stuck, going back wet and proud after pushing my bike up the wet hill. Let it beat me. I don't care. Biking in the rain would be about as real as life could get in that moment.

Still, I pedal faster. I turn around at the swimming hole, which offers a dead end. Nowhere else to go. Back up the hill, I find places I took for granted while coming down. This time, I face pavement and look up the thick legs of trees. The last time I was in the woods, I was in Discovery Park, Seattle, and I was a year younger. I had no water, and the height made me dizzy. A bus had dropped my boyfriend and me off at a summit, and we had trotted down, down, down, past old houses and park benches to the overlook on Puget Sound, and then down further, talking name origins and permanence and history and not quite love. The waves licked each other and shoved, and a pair of men with binoculars looked at us and smiled, us cold in our knit caps, my nose freezing to my scarf.

At the very bottom, on the rocky beach, I got dizzy and thirsty. I held onto him for support, feeling through his jacket his nothingness. He had nothing to offer. No furniture, no money, no real knowledge of the city. No promise of a certain future, for him or for us or for this place. There were granola bars his mother had sent. Coffee strained through a pink cone. No map, no answer, no location of water fountains in this park, no answers for whether this week's visit should become something longer, less elastic than a metaphorical phone cord stretching across the long diagonal of the country.

For three hours, we marched back up another mountain, on a quest for water. We found boarded-up bathrooms, water fountains dusty and with do-not-drink notices taped to them. We walked further up, following signs in circles, got lost and I laughed—*what else can you do?* Before he'd moved, the two of us had laughed through a parking lot, all the way from Red Lobster to my car, where our laughter steamed the windows, all because his vegetables had been served fried. And then again, we laughed our way through the movie *Phantom of the Opera*,

stifling our sounds in each other's coat elbows and wiping our tears with our shirtsleeves. If we understood anything, it should have been laughter. Sometimes I don't have any words to say, but I make sounds anyway.

The Sound was spread before us, and at the bottom, as the waves shredded themselves on the rocks, I wanted so much to vomit, for something to be wrong, something that I could point to as a cause or an effect, not a laugh that no one would understand. Runners passed us, going up hill. I hated them. My legs shook, my hands shook, and I was fucking cold. We'd wanted adventure, but we weren't prepared.

I'd brought water on my North Florida bike ride. Took the opportunities I could to refill, thinking of Seattle, of my headache, the way, after returning to his apartment after our exploration of the mountains, I'd stood in front of his big sliding glass window in his bare living room and looked at the space needle way in the distance and told my mom on the phone that I was a Florida girl. He'd heard that, warming himself over boiling pans in the kitchen. That was our best day, a day not spent drowning hunger in thick cups of coffee or in my headstands against the bare living room wall or reading. One morning, he gave me Gabriel Garcia Marquez's story "Light is Like Water" to read, and I'd wanted the sunlight through the window to stream in so thick and bright that we would slide down its rays and float somewhere between the air mattress and the scarves and cell phone charger cords on the floor and the ceiling. He played alt country out of the speakers from his laptop, which was arranged on a cardboard box with a stool in front of it, and he didn't lie with me like he used to when we'd listened to his records. Now I had his record player. It was mine to listen to in the fuzz between day and dark. It was up to me to forget to turn on the lights.

“Why don’t we talk?” I asked one day. He closed the book he was reading hard.

“Fine. What do you want to talk about?”

I cried. *I came four thousand miles.* I don’t think I said that. It was there, along with the fact that just before leaving I’d opened a rejection notice from the only grad school I’d applied to in the northwest. By the time he crouched to my side, the air mattress squishing beneath us, it was too late. Despite the way he took me to the library and to the park and a book signing and tried to take me to another author’s reading, but we couldn’t navigate the day-to-night-shift of the bus system in the cold, cold rain, and despite the kiss goodbye and the phone calls for months afterward, even after we’d decided our love just couldn’t stretch far enough and so must not really be love at all, despite all of those conversations and talks of bike rides and books read and unhappiness where we were, that moment on the bed was it. And for him, though we never talked about it, I know that “I’m a Florida girl” sealed it, long before the actual end.

I bought him lattes, and by the end of the week my chest burned with the thought of coffee, which I’d learned to get as plain as possible in order to save cash. In the hail as cyclists zipped by us on one side and cars on the other, he wrapped his roommate’s scarf around my throat and said, “Don’t get snot on it. It’s a very nice scarf.” I laughed, but I don’t know if I made a sound. Our umbrella danced into the street. It could have been quite romantic if I’d brought a scarf that day and an adequate coat at all. Between the kisses at the top of the hill and the coffee at the bottom, this was what I got.

After Discovery Park, we’d waited for the bus, after finally finding the park’s office. I bought a postcard for my dad and drank lots of water out of a lukewarm fountain. We waited for the bus and waited and waited. If I ran into the convenience store for Gatorade, I could miss the

bus. There was no reason to complain. Everything that needed to be said was there in the clear sun and the cool, cool air.

In Marianna, every up eventually met a down. Coasting back down again, I passed a speed limit 15 sign and wondered what I would be clocked at due to gravity, even without pedaling. For a brief second, I wondered how bad it would hurt to fall, cheek against gravel, legs still locked into my pedals. This was only a second, though. I needed to see myself straight up, poised, doing this outside and not in a dark Spinning room. Taking it outside, as the instructors said. Living it. Using the real outdoors as inspiration for those indoor rides set to music, just as the workout was originally intended. On the way to my grandparents' house, I'd been pulled over for speeding in a small-town school zone; I'd missed the big, flashing light. The officer said, "You must be thinking of the boy's heart you broke last night."

I'd laughed, thought of the sweaty club where I'd spent many of my summer nights, the apartment halls I'd kissed in, the antiseptic drinks I'd downed to get the taste of the woods, of one cold day, out of my mouth.

"You have no idea," I'd said, smiling a little. My summer had been about sparkly green eyelids and breaking boys before they broke me.

Maybe none of that or the ride itself mattered. Maybe I should have stayed in the Florida woods, excavated a dewy cave, made myself a mosquito shack. But I returned, hoping my sweat would prove something to my grandparents, something more real than Fox news. What I returned to was a yellow spot on the carpet, left by the dog in the middle of the night. Papa looked at it and grunted, and Grandma searched through the laundry room cupboards for cleaners.

“I’m good at getting stains out,” I said. “I spill stuff all the time.”

I took to my knees on the floor, spraying, blotting, spraying, and blotting until the can was empty and the stain was a damp shadow in tousled, gray carpet. The scent was sharp and necessary. I told Grandma I was earning my fried catfish.

“I don’t know what we’re going to do about that dog,” Papa said. “I’m sorry you had to clean that up.”

“I really don’t mind.” None of these words were necessary. I wanted to laugh it off. But I knew that if I started laughing, they wouldn’t understand.



## Displacement Under a Tamarind Sky

Roy took me to Miami when I was twenty-one. He was twenty-six then, a gay Cuban-American taking me to see Toni Morrison read selections from her new book, *Love*, at the Miami Book Fair. It was my first time there. We went into shops at Bayside and licked ice cream cones in tropical flavors outside that mall on the water. I chose guava, he chose tamarind, like the trees hung with little dry husks outside his parents' house. His was better, tasted like Juicy Fruit and something I couldn't quite point out, something of childhood, a cascade of flavor in each little brown scoop of the tongue. The guava was peach, almost pink, the color of a flamingo, creamed. Its sweetness coated my tongue. A non-local would get guava because it's such a fun word to say. The pink of it embarrassed me, as if the sweetness and my youth glowed from a distance. I didn't trust my own choices.

We ate our ice cream on a boardwalk near the water. Men stood in the vegetation below.

“People get murdered out here,” Roy said.

My lips twitched. I looked in his eyes for a joke. It was just true. “I believe you,” I said. We went back inside. Roy asked my opinion on a shirt at a boutique. He drove me past his old high school, describing how early he had to get on the bus to attend the magnet program. He pointed out the famous bridge, the one you can see in the opening credits of *Golden Girls*. At Popeyes, we met our friend Nicollete, who had driven me to Miami and allowed me to sleep in her parents' house the night before. I didn't eat fast food back then. The smell of grease and crunch and frozen shrimp and overly sweet frozen coffee drinks overwhelmed me. I had rules for food. No nuts. No carbs after six. Ice cream on occasion, since it had calcium. We waited

in line on the dark street, watching our professor fend off advances from men outside the church where Morrison would read.

She read slowly, deliberately. One who enjoyed the shape of the words in her mouth. One who was not modest of their beauty—in the air, they do the work they are meant to do. She said, "No one ever mentions the humor. I think my books are very funny. And no one mentions the colors." In my Studies of Toni Morrison class, we had talked about color, and not just the colors of characters. We'd discussed colors in quilts and houses. Browns and oranges in *Beloved*. Greens in *Paradise*. Blue and black and white, not just in people, but in brown candy wrappers and the blue light of movies and orange flowers in *The Bluest Eye*.

Those of us in the class stood in a row to have our books signed. Our professor was right there. "Mention the class," she said. The first girl just smiled and thanked Morrison. The second did the same. Then the professor went. And then it was me. "We've read all of your books for our class," I said. My stomach shook. She could probably sense my lack of eloquence. My quaking. Whenever I speak out loud and the speaking matters, I wish I could pretend to be mute and type instead. Or just talk with my hands, making my words course through my body rather than just my throat.

"We talked about humor and colors," I said. She looked up. I wanted to say something brilliant. I wore a stretchy denim skirt with side slits. I knew I was white, a girl, someone who tried to empathize. Someone who thought she might be able to understand without experience, to listen and read and then feel. *I'm trying the best I can*, I wanted to say. I was in Miami. Tears pushed at the backs of my eyes, and my words dissolved.

I don't remember the rest of the conversation, but I'm sure it involved the word "great." I slipped back into the crowd, sure that my professor was disappointed and buzzing with the delight of having stood so close to genius.

Roy and I headed to his house. Nicolette's house had been a veritable mansion with a morning kitchen table filled with newspapers and pastries and hot Cuban coffee I was afraid to try. A jolt could screw me up for the rest of the day. Worse, what if I didn't like it? I wouldn't be able to turn it away after I'd started drinking. That would be worse than turning it down all altogether. The TV was on, the teenaged brother reaching across for more juice and heading out who knew where. I didn't even know Nicolette—just that we were in class together and she was one of the few other people who said things, who braved the intimidating professor, besides me. In the car, though, we erupted into conversation. We agreed that we respected intimidating female professors because they took their jobs seriously and didn't take shit. The next morning, before breakfast, Nicolette entered her sister's room, where I was staying. Her sister was away at art school, and her high school bedroom was plastered with bumper stickers, concert stickers, magazine cut-outs, drawings, and posters. Nicolette sat right on the bed while I rubbed my eyes and said, "My dad just caught me and my boyfriend."

"Caught you?" Oh, God.

"He's pissed."

I'd had no experience with getting caught, or even with sex, but she was looking for a confidante. An empathetic ear. "What did he say?" I asked, when I really wanted to ask what compromising position they'd been caught in.

But then her dad was at the foot of the stairs, calling up to offer me Cuban coffee. Music blared. When I'd walked in, they'd all kissed me on both cheeks. And they didn't even know me. My color rose to meet their cheeks.

After Morrison's reading, Roy and I headed back to his parents' house with the tamarind tree. His parents were long in bed, so we whispered.

This is what I really remember of the whole weekend. I hadn't eaten dinner, and as the thrill of the reading and signing was settling into my feet, hunger took its place in my belly. Back at Roy's parents' house, just above the poverty line, Roy led me to his high school bedroom, deposited me at the foot of the bed, and brought me a bowl of cubed cheese.

The cheese was simultaneously sharp and soft against the inside of my cheek. Each bite released a flavor of protein and home. My mom's home on the other coast, before all the eating rules. We set the ceramic bowl between us, and I smiled while I ate the cheese.

Roy showed me his Tori Amos collection from high school. We flipped through his high school year books, the picture of his best friend, who had responded to Roy's confession of loving him by changing the subject: "Let's get a burger." Things change. People change. But Tori was still Roy's favorite, after all those years and her commercial-image changes and drug phases and personal trauma. There was a scrapbook of her. Everyone I'd experienced in Miami had something like this—an identity sewn into the place and bigger culture. I had my skirt from a retail store common to most malls. I had a desperation to swallow individuality with my eyes. The wrong decision could say the wrong thing about me. The wrong decision could make me the wrong person. And so my identity was wrapped in this paranoid pressure. I wore what

everyone else wore, if I could find it. I wore my friends' hand-me-downs. I listened to other people's music, embarrassed to like the sincere pop of Lisa Loeb. In high school, I used to collect pictures of actresses. I wasn't sure why, but I think it had something to do with jealousy. With wanting to capture what they had so that I could have it, too. I had an eating disorder that started long before I ever stopped eating. As I looked through Roy's books, I wondered if it was because I was attracted to the women. But that didn't seem quite right; Roy's Tori collection wasn't about that kind of love.

For me, paying attention to actresses had more to do with defining and owning cuteness. How could I get what those women seemed to have? How could I be desired? We listened long past the point where the bowl emptied and I'd slumped to the bed and my eyes kept closing. I wanted to kiss Roy. I wanted to crumple there in his bed and never get up again. He and I had been to parties together, and he'd been the one to take care of me, laughing and doing yoga with me in a back room while others drank quart-sized cups of alcohol and kissed in the halls.

Because I feel intensely vulnerable, I shield myself. Few people find me through that immediately. Perhaps those people recognize these shields and know the secrets to breaking through them because they are so used to looking through their own. Roy found me. But that didn't mean he wanted me. And if he had, which is what I thought I might want, I wouldn't have felt safe there, in his bed.

I slept on his brother's black bed, and when I woke in a pool of sunlight Roy's parents had already left for work. I was fed Corn Pops in a wide soup bowl with chocolate soy milk (for his father's cholesterol). I ate it with a soup spoon, and I felt miniature. A child, eating sugar for breakfast with her big brother beside her. One more visit to the tamarind tree, stories and

histories spilling and rattling their sweet dry husks in the wind. Roy's nostalgia, his pride, his fear for this neighborhood. Back in his Toyota, he sets two cold cans in the cup holder—one Malta and one Coke, for the gringa. I blush.

On the way home, he indoctrinated me to the music of Tori Amos and Ani DiFranco. He explained Tori in detail—rape, fear, run rabbit run. It didn't make sense, but after an hour I pulled my knees to my chest and let the words fall over me, along with the anger of the strident chords in the background. Weights settled deep behind my eyes, plunging anchors into tears that didn't spill over.

Conversation turned to poetry classes. I'd taken fiction and nonfiction workshops, but not poetry, though I had written a few poems. He was a lit major, still taking poetry classes, expanding himself. I was narrowing. Doing a lot of things, but always narrowing. Who was I supposed to be? What did the world want me to be?

He'd written a poem about an erection, and only one person in the class, a boy I had a crush on, had gotten it. I laughed, red-faced, though I'd never seen an erection. Much as I respected Roy and as uncomfortable as I might have been with committing to an identity everyone would see beyond typical-sweet-girl, there were some possibilities I just knew were not true. I was not gay. I was not a man. I was not Cuban or black or any other sort of minority, besides being a woman. I was not quite blonde, not quite a brunette. Not quite a talented actress, not quite sure of myself. Not quite anyone, and yet the people I liked seemed to like me just fine. I didn't know what foods I should like. How to guess that the most unassuming, brown ice cream would be such an oral explosion. I had not had sex, had not even been kissed, and

after Roy's explanation of Tori's music, I sincerely felt that Roy might have a better idea of what it meant to be a young woman than I did.

So I hugged my knees to my chest and sipped a little Malta, hurt that he hadn't brought any for me. Of course it was wonderful. And then I drank my Coke, even though breakfast sugar still kicked in my veins. Even though it wasn't diet. And again, a pulse of childhood, something not quite definable, dropped nothing more than the weight of a shadow in my chest, and I knew that before I could find someone like Roy to love and be loved by, I needed to find my own wisdom. I didn't have to understand Tori Amos, but I had to talk about something. I had to own up to my obsessions and interests. And every once in a while eat some sugar.

This is what I've found I have: rooms and clothes to describe that help express me when all the logical, abstract words and sentences and prepositions that are supposed to hold them in won't string nets around what I'm trying to say. Instead, images hang heavy, pregnant in nets in my mind. I have people like Roy who can read my eyes before I know what I'm thinking and then let me puzzle through my thoughts with fragmented sentences in hushed tones. I have the people I love, those people who press emotion out of my eyes, those people I want so desperately to love me, in any ways they can.

I'm in Birmingham, visiting a friend whose husband cheated on her. They're trying to reconcile, and I hate him. I hate him. I hate him. I don't want to understand him. I want to hate him. I'm mad. And I never admit to being mad. While my friend calls him a jerk, it sounds like she's only saying it because she knows her mother and I want her to. But there's no energy behind it. Her eyes dull. The person behind them goes away. That's the best I can explain.

He slept with someone else, after waiting with my friend until marriage. He doted over her for years of courtship, and then he slept with two other women, and I hate him for lying to us. For hurting her. For not talking when he should have. And now *she's* talking. She's talking about almost everything except the negative. And I want to see her angry at him, not just calling him a scumbag. The word knocks the wind out of her from the inside out. I even want to see her talk about loving him. I want to talk about loving my boyfriend. That's new to me, and I thought we could share it. Now I'm afraid to mention anything.

When you don't know who to trust in a parking lot, you should be able to trust the people you sleep with. We should be allowed someone to trust. Too many people tempt stranger-trust, jumping into bed with whomever, testing the elasticity of their safety zones. I've dated. I know the game. It involved a lot of laughing, at them and then at myself. Stories told themselves over the cushions of empty couches, and then I cried. And so I am careful. But careful only gets you so far. And now here I am, listening to a person who's not saying anything, and I don't know what to say to her. Don't want to break another trust. She thinks they should get a new bed, one not so much like an altar. From four-poster blonde wood to just a mattress on the floor, which is too reminiscent of too many bachelor pads I've woven my way around myself. My relationship knowledge is limited, but I know that rearranging the furniture won't solve the problems.

Why do I think about Miami when I'm in Birmingham, sitting on a couch that used to be in my apartment, wearing my pajama pants hours after my friend has donned pantyhose and heels to go to church? Why am I thinking of Roy, and why am I getting nostalgic for a city with so much confidence it scares me?



It's been four years since the Miami trip. Since then, I've gained ten pounds. I've taken Spinning classes. I don't fear what fast food will do to my hips as much as I used to. While I don't give tutorials of favorite musicians' discographies to friends, I have been known to flip from one CD to the next on long car trips, punching the "skip" button right to the songs I'm looking for to improvise mixes on the highway, often taking the songs out-of-order from the albums into something of an emotional chronology of the past five years of my life.

Birmingham is nothing like Miami. There's no guava ice cream, no rattling tamarind hulls.

But there are four palm-sized cupcakes topped with pink flowers in buttercream frosting from Edgar's Bakery on the counter. There is coffee. And there are the two of us, trying to be adults and always retreating to flannel pajama pants, to sugar, her to church, me to the heat of my laptop and to music I haven't played in years. "Winter" by Tori Amos comes on, and I put it on repeat, the piano notes striking through the spring, and now, in a new situation, two and a half years and six hundred miles from the apartment we used to share, I am home.

## CHAPTER THREE: TOURIST TRAP

### Dance Maps

We burn maps of the city into our retinas. I used to think I was a visual learner, but I was way off; it turns out that the girl who used to be afraid to touch things learns with her hands. This makes sense, really, as the sense of touch is most personal to me. When I was a teenager, my mother, a teacher of young, trainable, mentally handicapped children, once handed me a surgical sponge and rubber-textured bandage, just like those she gave her tactile-defensive students. “You have to brush yourself,” she said, “or you’ll never want anyone to touch you.” In the safety of my bedroom I tried this once, running the flat side of the sponge up my forearm. It felt like a violation. Something five-year-old autistic boys are supposed to do. So I put it in a desk drawer and for a few years resigned myself to feeling only what the characters in movies felt when they touched each other’s waists and hands.

Years in band taught me to listen, but more than that, they taught me to feel, listening through the vibrations that ran up my legs and into my stomach, as my feet were always pressed into the floor. I am a doer. A person whose hands learn patterns before her eyes see them or ears hear them. I feel actors’ lips on my own neck, their fingers on my own back. I get visceral, physical, emotional reactions to news stories often before I can name the emotion. Hearing that a close friend's husband had told her he no longer loved her and hadn't for a year still thickens the back of my throat and spills my stomach a little to the back.

Sometimes I can't move. My body loses its ability to process. I can only take a little of the evening news at a time, take that onslaught of picture and action and sound in small doses.

The newspaper is better. It moves at my pace. My eyes catch one picture, one word at a time. I feel like I'm taking it all in at once, but I'm not. My senses get a chance to warm up. My body catches up with my mind, and, later in the day, my mind catches up with my body.

Maps. When I moved to Orlando six years ago, I did not buy a map. It took five years for me to finally buy a seven-dollar map of the city. Before that, I drove friends who knew their ways better than I through interstate highways and suburbs. I rode shotgun with my roommate and wrote down the street sequence of back routes. I called friends for help when I got lost. And I simply got lost, often on my bike just miles from home, trying not to burn the same wrong path so many times that the wrong way got permanently etched into my mind.

I bought that map after I'd moved to another part of the city. I couldn't establish my place between the major roads. I knew how to get to school, to the grocery store, and to the mall, but the placement of particular stores along particular roads blurred together in my mind—every conduit is lined with strip malls and stores of the same retail varieties, over and over. In my mind, I often mistook a chain restaurant or electronics store on Highway 50 for its competitor on nearby 17-92. It took a while for these roads to establish their own characteristics—50 is bright and void of trees, and Aloma is tired and busy, as are the buildings and people at the bus stops that flank it. It took me going out and attaching memories to particular places along these in order for the routes and my destinations to become attached in my mind.

I laid my map out on the glass dining table beneath the low-hanging light. With my finger, I traced pink and blue roads from my alcove of the city to the major arteries that bordered it. I could have marked my favorite places with gold foil stars. Instead of being what the roads

were, they became "the way to" a particular place. The bend in Fairbanks became "the way to Park Ave CDs" (back when it was on Park Ave.); the congested part of Fairbanks, where the railroad tracks met, became "the way to Austin Coffee"; Aloma to Hall, bordered by people on bikes looking for a break in traffic as a chance to cross the busy street became "the way to school." No matter where I was, I was on a path to somewhere else. And if I happened to use a route I normally took to get to a different location, unless I really focused, I ended up where those roads usually took me, and I had to retrace my steps and reimagine my mental map in order to find where I had really meant to go.

## Rilo Kiley

The first time I heard Rilo Kiley's music, I was in Amy's car on the Universal Studios side of Orlando. Nicole was in the back seat, and we were running off for a cheap dinner of nachos and tacos. Amy always serenaded us with the latest in the indie-rock world, and she and Nicole often had the types of conversation I've grown used to in indie crowds—they discuss band names that sound to me like nothing more than random words and sounds thrown together, and if I want to keep up, I'm always a few sentences behind, trying to figure out which parts of sentences were the nouns and which the verbs.

Amy often burned stacks of CDs for me—here's Metric and Green Day and The Postal Service and everything else you need to listen to right now. That night, she turned on her car stereo, and I liked what I heard, but at first I didn't pay much attention. After dinner, the next track played, and the seductive sounds of a ballad pulled me out of the conversation and to the stereo. A couple songs later, I interrupted Amy and Nicole to demand, "Who is this? I need to listen to this band. I think I love them."

"Rilo Kiley," she said. "I thought you might like them."

"Rilo *what?*" And that's how it began.

Back at her apartment, she burned a CD for me. After listening to *More Adventurous* several times, I bought my own copy, along with copies of their two previous CDs, *Take Offs and Landings* and *The Execution of All Things*. Christmas was coming up, so I bought copies for

my sister and a couple friends. I felt that everyone needed to hear this music. Everyone needed to be part of the Rilo Kiley experience in order to understand who I was.

That I was angry. That I felt trapped in a cellophane wrapper of sweetness, always apologizing and asking forgiveness, when really I wanted to sing out in my little alto voice and swear and cock an eyebrow at men. But whenever I did swear or cock an eyebrow or sing out loud, my efforts hit that cellophane wall and bounced right back into my blushing face. Cute was my defense. Cute was my way out of sexual situations that edged beyond flirtation. Cute was my way out of angering the world around me by showing my anger. Cute equaled the muscular reflex to just let go when the body knows it's taken on more than it can handle. It was the big brother that always steps in the path of danger. Cute was my superego, flying in to save me before I needed saving.

At the first show, I stood on The Social's steps with Amy and Nicole. At that time, the only album I'd heard was *More Adventurous*. We were late; we missed Tilly and the Wall and saw part of Now It's Overhead, which wasn't too impressive. We stood so close we could have touched the guitars waiting in the rack, but we couldn't dance. Not on steps. I was elevated, though—always a good thing for a 5-6 girl—and for arriving so late, we were very close to the stage.

The audience didn't do much jumping, not much rocking out. A good amount of singing along. Our friends Emily and John stood out in the middle of the crowd, po-going in a sea of crossed arms and cross-forehead bangs. But still, the band played and played, singing all out and

banging keyboards with force. The lead singer's eyes met mine—that was the power of such a small venue—the audience gets more than the band squinting into lights. They jumped and shook on stage, showing us how to sing along to their music. Their clothing was simple, not the costumes we would see in a later show. Since that night, I've craved the energy of such a show in such a venue again.

They aren't likely to play a small stage again, now that they are part of Warner Brother's label. They'll take their acts to the big stages where they'll stand above the crowd.

How could I describe the feeling of a great dance or a great show? You just. let. go. You rock out. You flail your arms and let your hips move to their own interpretation of the beat. It's like letting yourself go at the end of a sprint in a cycling class—you put all your sweat and your red face and self-anger and self-satisfaction out there. You let yourself grimace and smile. You let your tendons stretch and strain and push and pull as much as they want. You *don't hold back*. And in a cycling class, you hear the whir of all the other bikes. You can close your eyes and feel the force of the other bikes pushing you up imaginary hills, an imagined pack of riders biting at your back wheel.

At the end of class, you sit up and look around. Everyone else is red in the face, even in the dark. Everyone else is drinking water and mopping up sweat. The same is true at a concert or dance club; those strobe lights may be momentarily blinding, and you can let go into that. You can fly in the steam of your sweat and your friends' sweat and even the sweat of strangers.

When I watch shows, especially if I dance and sing along, I can find myself in this same sort of community with those in the audience and even on stage. Performers feed off the

audience and vice-versa. This is an even more self-conscious situation than a dance floor. But watching someone appear to relax and give it all on stage—for themselves, for you, for the hope of the money or for the loss of it all in all the time and money spent for this one performance, this four-minute song, this two-second chord—triggers an intense jealousy in me. A jealousy for cuteness and attention and that kind of talent, and, more than anything else because I believe it is the source for everything else—that ability to just. let. go. In front of people. In a way that encourages respect rather than ridicule. Because I can't let go. I hem myself inside webs of anxiety. My streets are worries; my avenues are my limitations, and my green, acre-sized parks of ambitions and desires get blocked in by that imaginary asphalt. The people most in control of themselves understand maps, both of their cities and of their minds. They see aerial views of everything. Every choice is a matter of North, South, East, or West. In Sarasota, people used to tell me to head toward the water, an absurd suggestion unless you follow the sun or seagulls because, unless you're on the beach, you can't see the water from the road. But there are people who always see the water. I only understand directions in terms of where I've been before.

Like paths burned by electrical fires in our brains, each route brings on the same memories, the same emotions, follows the same rote patterns. When I go somewhere new, I have to fuse routes together. Directions to an old boyfriend's house merge with directions to a mechanic shop as I drive there from a new boyfriend's apartment. The sun through the windshield beams down while he emphasizes the cardinal directions that will lead to major highways. "But I don't care about the 417," I say. "I'm trying to get to the mechanic." For people without anxiety disorders, for people who can just let go, the world must seem like one long, grassy hill made for rolling.





## Tourist Trap: Mental Maps

### *Mental Map I: Off Campus*

All my life, I've lived in places centered around tourism. I grew up in Sarasota, known for its award-winning powder sand on Siesta Key. I grumbled about tourists with license plates from Michigan and New Hampshire and then later made excuses for their driving to non-native friends; they didn't know their way, and, annoying as that can be, our economy nearly depends on them.

There was always a heavy tourist influence on the beach economy and in real-estate, but as a child, I didn't see tourism affecting my life in more ways than traffic and beach crowds. Now I wonder what kind of influence living in such a popular destination has had on me. I've seen people in terms of a binary: who belongs and who does not, and everywhere I go that is different, I try to figure out that puzzle. Where I come from, one of the worst insults is to be called a tourist. Tourists are naive, gullible, and get in the way. I don't want to cross that line, so everywhere I go, I try to figure out how to get *in*. I try to figure out what divides those who know from those who don't. And I wonder if I will ever feel comfortable being on the outside because, unless I stay in Sarasota or Orlando forever, I will inevitably one day face the discomfort of living in place I do not know, and, being from a tourist mecca, that place is likely to be the most unexpected, snow-covered, land-locked state there is, a place so un-touristy that not being a native will turn me into a side-show act. Until then, I'll learn to adapt in the sunny, touristy settings close to home, as I have in Orlando for the past six years.

In Orlando, the young adult culture is marked by two major, defining characteristics: anti-everything and impermanent. Many of the city's young people are brought here by one of the several colleges, most of which are on the east side of town or in Winter Park, far from Downtown and even further from the theme park epicenter. College is supposed to mark a transient state of life—you fly here, still write your parents' home as your permanent address, differentiate in your speech between "home" and "the apartment" or "Orlando" (with home being your apartment to your Orlando friends and home being *home*—your true home, Sarasota—to your mother) and you expect to fly off to another place in four years (or back home, as the case may be), crushing this city where you spent what may very well be your most formative years during which you hinged between being a teenager and adult and sometimes your seven-year-old self, all of which might get reduced to nothing more than a two-line note on your resume.

For my first year, I shared this view. I was going to use Orlando. I would live on campus as long as possible, remain connected to my closest friends at home, return to Sarasota a reasonable number of times during the semester, take advantage of internship possibilities at Orlando publishing companies or whatever other opportunities might reveal themselves, and then move on. My visual image of Orlando included the landmarks of the Magic Kingdom and Universal Studios, but, unlike what I understand is a more popular view among most Americans, my perspective was not limited to the vacation destinations. My great-aunt and -uncle had lived in Orlando for around fifty years, and on visits to their ranch house in a suburban tangle off of Orange Blossom Trail, during which we rarely went to a theme park but instead spent our days in their pool or, when the heat got unbearable, squeezed into their breakfast nook. The adults

talked, and I counted chickens in the wallpaper when I wasn't trying to get Maggie, their boxer, to chase me.

When I was a freshman, there was theme-park appeal, especially for those from other states, who all seemed to hold year-round passes. Before 9/11, after which the theme parks lost a lot of money and jacked up their prices, buying a year's pass to all four Magic Kingdom parks and/or Universal's two parks was not out of the question. I considered doing this, but, being one who bores easily and doesn't like to have her shoulders burned in great crowds of people who don't know where they're going, I opted instead to attend with friends on various occasions rather than every weekend. I assumed these girls would eventually find other ways to spend their time, anyway. Real ways not dependent on plastic sets, no matter how real they might look.

Funny—as children, we're overwhelmed by entering fantastic places that don't seem real but must be because we're walking through them. As adults, we're interested in learning how real locations are replicated so exactly (or nearly—sometimes you can tell they're not real, and this is actually part of the appeal, the part that keeps a fake New York from becoming uncanny and creepy). It's as if, like in learning what an athlete eats for lunch every day or how many times that writer went to rehab, we'll discover some architectural secret, something infinitesimal, where bolt kisses steel, that will reveal the secret to its incandescence, its success, its innate beauty and charm. By learning this secret, through replication, we, too, can tap into our own potential, our own inner New Yorks, and succeed.

The funny thing was that those out-of-towners who held passes had gone more times in their lives than I, who lived only two hours away from Kissimmee. Mom didn't ride roller coasters, Dad wasn't big on crowds, and, after all, we had award-winning sand to occupy us.

This is a slight exaggeration. My parents didn't keep me from going to the parks. I was rewarded field trips to Orlando in middle and high school, and on band trips when we got to play in afternoon parades. And I hate to say it, but past page ten, it's simply more fun to ride roller coasters with your friends than with your parents. So I didn't miss out.

As for the award-winning sand, my sister Sara and I are probably in close contention for being the family members to utilize the gulf shore most. My earliest memories of Sara are of her being darkly freckled, wearing a shiny cheetah-print bikini with a small gold necklace, coasting the salty waves, belly-down, on her gray raft which was lined with cups in which a can of soda could be wedged. She used to take me to the beach with her, but I knew from her tan that she went more often than that when she wasn't working. It was her freedom.

Some of my earliest freedoms involved the beach, too. As soon as my friend Katherine got her driver's license, we filled her mother's Geo tank with five dollars of gas and headed out, wading in the water, tossing our hair over our shoulders, peering around for the expected-yet-repugnant glances of old men. We timed roasting on our stomachs and backs, being careful to lay the SPF-30 on thick, as we both had the natural complexions of dinner plates. We made plans for when we would be dark and thin, six-packed from hours of beach volleyball, the likes of which were a summer fantasy MTV would be proud to film. I remembered that goal throughout high school and went out once a week, or as often as I could, during my senior year in preparation to wear a strapless prom dress. I didn't get that six-pack or a Malibu tan—I freckled like both my sisters—but I enjoyed lying on a towel in the sand, feeling the hot wind wrap around my exposed back. One day I would leave, and this beach sand that all the Germans

and English came to get caught in their bathing suits and between their toes and take home with them in the folds of their belly buttons would no longer be mine to take for granted.

At first, the college plan worked as expected. I lived in the dorm freshman year, made some friends, went to some theme parks, spent some money. The second year, I lived on campus again, in a new, white-walled apartment, and the trips to theme parks came to an end. I made the appropriate number of trips home, I think: the requisite family holidays, a few nephews' birthday parties, and a few random weekends I didn't feel like being alone, if I knew my roommates were going to be gone.

It was a happy life. A safe life. My roommates and I never ventured far from our little rectangular slot of home. The grocery store was three miles away. The campus offered paths for running. The new gym was less than a five-minute walk. Our classes were scattered across campus, and, unlike others who lived in the apartments, we walked to them, often walking back to the apartment between classes to work or nap and then hit the sidewalk again. Anna, the roommate on the track team, often had her boyfriend and track friends over. Shelley, another roommate, kept to herself, working long hours on art projects in her bedroom. Meredith, Anna, and I played board games, ate ice cream at a nearby chain restaurant, ate hamburgers at other chain restaurants, and went shopping in nearby malls. The world was insular. School was what we were in Orlando for, and it didn't make sense to deviate from that. We had everything we needed, until Shelley needed to go to the hospital.

It was a weekday morning. Anna was in class, Meredith and I were eating cereal, and Shelley stumbled out of her room wearing only a T-shirt and a pair of underwear. This was not the normal Shelley routine. Normally, Shelley would exit her room completely dressed, pin her

hair in the mirror, dab some make-up onto her cheeks, pick up an art project, and head to her car with, possibly, a “Good morning” on her way out. This morning, she was crying. Her hair was down, she was grabbing her middle, and she was collapsing on the couch.

Where was a hospital?

Meredith’s parents were from Orlando, more specifically Winter Park and College Park, both of which are near Downtown, which, at that time, only meant something about taking a toll road to me. Winter Park Hospital was the only hospital Meredith knew. At her desk, on a square sticky note, she wrote

University→

Right on 436

Left on Aloma

Left on Lakemont

Shelley added a pair of shorts, grabbed her purse, and we were off. Meredith had a class she couldn’t miss. As we headed down, I hoped to God the numbers would be on the road signs. Sometimes in this town all you get are one or the other even though every major road has at least two names, one of which is numerical. As the roads opened up and we got further and further from campus, I tried to remember being here before, visiting Meredith’s grandfather. There had been a winding road. And lakes. And an Episcopal church that looked like a traditional Episcopal church like the one I’d attended in Sarasota, not one of those plain-white-building Episcopal churches. Riding through there had made me smile.

I dropped Shelley off at the sliding doors before I parked, and she thought I was going to leave her. “I’ll be right back,” I said. In the waiting room, I watched her fill out a form with shaking hands. After she went through triage and was led back to a room, someone led me to her. Her room was frigid, another white cube. A doctor came in and told her she had kidney stones. *All that milk and ice cream and chocolate (her sustenance for late-night art)?*, I wondered. A nurse came in at one point, and, after checking on Shelley, turned on the TV. A grainy episode of *ER* came on. “That’s appropriate,” Shelley said. I smiled. “What do you want to watch?” She closed her eyes, closing out, or maybe closing in, the pain. “I don’t care.”

Before long, Shelley was whimpering. And not long after that, she was moaning.

I fidgeted and tried to listen—and see through the grain—what was happening on the TV set. Goosebumps rippled over my shoulders and arms. It was so cold in that little room. Why hadn’t I thought to bring a sweater? Or a book? And why didn’t anyone take away her pain?

After a while, another nurse came in. This one was a big man, and he took up the room with his happy awokeness. “Ooh. You look cold,” he said to me. I nodded and flicked a glance over at Shelley. She was the one in pain. “Want a blanket?” he said. He opened a drawer and handed me a sheet of white. I took it wondering if Shelley would be charged.

“How’s this lady doing?” he asked. “Does she still have her shoes on?” He lifted the bottom of her blanket to reveal her sandaled feet. “You want these off?” he asked her. She waved her head a little bit and squeezed her eyes shut tighter. He looked at me. “Does she want these off?” I just looked at him. Was I supposed to do that earlier? Why didn’t I think of that? And what did she want? Her pain to go away, I was sure. Leave her with her shoes. Take away her pain.



I shrugged, and he pulled the blanket back over her feet.

On his way out, he looked up at the TV set. “Bad reception in here,” he said. I nodded, just a little, even though that really wasn’t important. He looked up at the TV and shook his head.

Meredith called when she got out of class. We’d been there about four hours at that point. I tried to make Shelley laugh, or at least stop writhing. But whatever they’d given her initially had worn off. And you don’t moan in front of someone you don’t really know.

I turned off the TV. She moaned more. I rubbed my arms, stuck my head out the door. Lots of carts, lots of instruments, but no people. I went to her bedside. “It’s going to be okay,” I said. I was not a comforter. Not a touchy-feely girl. I slowly laid shaking fingers on her shoulder. “Sh. You’re going to be okay.” Did she want to be talked to like a baby? I would try.

I couldn’t handle it any more. I felt her pain in my own stomach, felt her moans coming up out of my throat, emptying me. Finally, finally I went back in the hall. I saw a nurse coming out of the next room. “Please,” I said. “My friend is in a lot of pain. Anything you can do...”. A few minutes later there was someone with a needle. I turned my head and shivered beneath my blanket.

Not long after, Shelley was sitting up signing papers and taking instructions. “Can I have two doctor’s notes for the classes I missed today?” she asked. I did a double-take. Doctor’s note? While, sure, I had considered that I would be missing class, I hadn’t considered that I’d miss anything so vital that a doctor’s note would be needed to excuse my absence. More than that, I was shocked that, since Shelley had regained her sanity, she hadn’t considered any excuse I might need. At the door of the hospital, she’d looked scared. I hadn’t even thought of leaving

her until then, until she'd said, "I don't know how long it will be." And here I was, six hours later, ready to drive her back home again and eat, eat, eat.

She ended up being okay. Painkillers were prescribed, and, honestly, the other girls and I didn't hear another word about the experience, which surprised us. We expected shrieks in the middle of the night as she passed the stones. But nothing. It was as if that day had never happened. Art and chocolate went on as usual.

That hospital became my big star on the map of health after that incident. Shelley wasn't the last friend I took, and I hope I got better at making those I took laugh. I was fascinated by the workings of the hospital: the medicine, the staff, the organization, the fact that we went all that way, to another part of town, just to face another little white room and the same TV shows we had back at home, wherever home might have been to us that week.

Traveling there opened up my world. Afterward, I took to those roads on Sunday mornings. They were nearly unrecognizable without thick traffic. I entered a church mustier than mine at home, but when the organ played, I got wrapped up in the Latin melodies I hadn't heard in years. Other churches sang the same words to different melodies, but here the music lifted in all the right spots and the organ music wrapped around me like warm wind on the beach. In this foreign place with foreign roads and crushing ceilings suspended over white, white walls, here was a building as dark as the insides of trees. Whether or not I was going to be religious, I needed to wake early. I needed the uncrowded drive. I needed the skirt and to pass the plate and to crunch the wafer embossed with crosses. I needed to hear that music, to feel it through the soles of my shoes, even down in the point of my heels, and I needed to sit in the back so I could look out into the distance, which I did so rarely between those white walls and in tiny classrooms

and in front of computer screens. That was why I walked to class, that and the exercise: being able to look into the distance, to breathe fresh air, not fresh out of the mouths of others. And most of all, I needed to say familiar words, to feel them rise from my gut without any thought.

I needed to trust the answers.

## *Mental Map II: Downtown*

Shelley's kidney stone led me to the hospital, which led me to go to Winter Park on my own. Really, Meredith, with her knowledge of Winter Park and our drives to her grandfather's house, initially led me in that direction. Certain locations, like that wood-paneled church and the automatic glass emergency room doors burned into my mind as locations on my mental map.

Meeting friends outside the apartment also helped. I joined a group of English majors who essentially served as a board of event planners. These upper-classmen read my just-beginning work and pulled me into their pocket of hipster-culture know-how. Amy was the one who introduced me to the multi-colored world of Downtown.

Unlike most college social life, which seems to revolve around a town, central to which is the college campus, UCF is separated from Downtown by several miles and at least two tollbooths. UCF has been UCF since the '60s but is only now facing a tremendous boom—up from 36,000 when I started attending in 2001 to 47,000 in 2007. Two years ago, successful mom-and-pop and independent restaurants, coffee shops, and bars popped up in the three strip malls nearest to campus, but a plethora of chain restaurants (most of which are owned by Darden, an Orlando-based company), dominate the area. The two major roads (both seven lanes) that intersect in front of campus are dangerous enough to discourage most biking and walking. Efforts are being made on campus to make something of a miniature city out of the new towering housing, but these are all operated by contract, with no room for a private vendor to come in and give the area some flavor.

As a freshman, I enjoyed going to the chain restaurants, which were reminiscent of those where I celebrated Friday-night football games in high school. Others, which weren't in my hometown, reminded friends of home, and each had a certain, well-researched set of familiar comforts—an eye-catching color scheme, a friendly typeface to the menu and signs, and food that wasn't going to stay in the memory, for reasons either bad or good. To depart from this, freshman needed to learn from older folks where to go. Those in fraternities and sororities were eager to point you Downtown or to drop names of bars like Tabu and Cowboys, leaving it to the newbies to Mapquest their asses into Friday night fun.

Not being much of a drinker, driver, or dancer, I didn't take any of those recommendations into account. I was curious and gladly listened to the stories of other girls in the dorm who donned their short skirts and lip gloss for nights out, but I wasn't sure. Drunk people? Downtown? And I don't know how to dance! Scenes from the Roxbury SNL sketch popped into my mind.

My indoctrination into the world of Downtown began as one would expect, with the advice of upperclassmen, but ended with the geekiest (albeit quite culturally cool—it depends on your circles—event possible), a ticket to the Orlando Shakespeare Festival's modern adaptation of "The Merchant of Venice" at Lake Eola.

Amy, Alli, and I took off with Amy behind the wheel, the Speedpass transponder beeping with every toll we took on the 408. She knew just what roads to take, what garage to park in, and where to find a Subway so I could have some dinner before the show. At 6:00 p.m., not a lot was happening. A few guys in torn clothing swerved across the sidewalks, and the

cement-cracked doorways showed their wear in the waning light. *This* was Downtown? Where were the restaurants? The tourists? The business people grabbing a quick bite or a drink?

I didn't voice these questions, as I didn't want to solidify my position as the Downtown novice. The light faded and the metal benches in front of the shell-shaped theater filled. Behind the shell, the tourists announced themselves by paddling swan-shaped boats around the lake. When the curtain opened and people crowded in with blankets and hot chocolate, I finally felt that community feeling. We were out. We were nowhere near campus. We were Downtown, and I was just getting an idea of what that might mean for me in this new city.

Lake Eola received a shell-shaped tack on my mental map. It was by the lake, toll roads away from campus. In my mind, the toll roads stepped out like ladders laid flat—a bumpy ride that would get you there nonetheless.

The second time I went, it was for a Lisa Loeb concert at The Social. I distinctly remember Amy driving, though, sadly, she does not remember this show; Mandy, Trisha, Andrea, Amy, and I met in front of the campus book store in the dark, and all but Amy left their cars in the campus parking garages, which somehow felt wrong to me, even though I lived on campus, because we weren't going to be on campus. I felt a little bit rebellious.

Amy doesn't remember this night, but she was a big part of it for me—she and I were the only ones who really enjoyed the music. Andrea and Mandy balked because tickets at the door were so high—twenty dollars—and because Ms. Loeb had requested no smoking in the bar. Trisha was up for something new, Amy was versed in all things indie-musical, and I was a sincere-acoustic nerd.

That night, The Social put on an all-ages show, so the audience included entire families graced with little girls as well as what I would soon come to recognize as the Orlando Indie Contingent, girls in low-cut, loose-hanging dresses with side-cut bangs plastered to their heads if not hanging into their eyes. There weren't many men at this show, and, because this was a Lisa Loeb show, a heavy number of women sported those trademark cat-eye glasses and the updated version, flat, rectangular lenses. As for me, I wore jeans and a fitted T-shirt, and I simply wound my uncontrollable hair into a pony tail in the October humidity.

Before my days of concert-going Downtown, The Social was called The Sapphire Social Club, and, more familiarly, Sapphire. The change must have occurred just a year or so before my indoctrination, as upperclassmen still made concession for the name-change when they discussed the club, as in "They're at The Social. You know, what used to be Sapphire?" This was usually answered with, "Oh, the Sapphire," always said in a tone of *why didn't you say so?* There was a sense of nostalgia when they referred to it as such, but it's hard for me to understand why. Sure, new management brings changes in decor, atmosphere, and drinks. There might be sociopolitical discrepancies as well. But what I cared about was what I got in that moment, not what I might have missed out on. I was there then, ready to sneak sips of my friend's beers when the bouncers' eyes weren't on my x-marked hands. I was ready to become one of the money who knew where to go and made the choice of whether or not to go there. One in the know of what shows were coming up, where to get the information, and where the best places were to see them. That was my goal, but five years later, I still rely on Amy for that information.

The room never completely filled, but it did get pretty crowded, the bar along the back lit with activity and bright bottles of alcohol prised with blue light from below. The Social is

known for having the best sound, with its all-wood atmosphere, and the proximity of stage to pit to railed-standing area gives it an intimate feel. When I saw Rilo Kiley there a couple years later, I stood on the steps to the pit, right next to the stage, close enough to touch the guitars. From that close, even though the artists are on stage, they aren't elevated to above-human heights. They're right there, drinking out of the same cups and bottles we are, possibly even wearing the same boots beneath their vintage jeans, and it's possible to tell here. If you want them to be super-human, that transformation has to happen in your mind, without the aid of pyrotechnics or video screens in the background. Here, the artists have wooden acoustics, access to lights, their own instruments and amps. They have to play to an audience that is likely to be accepting but skeptical, eager to move but only if provoked. Until then, they'll stand in front of the stage, cigarettes in hand, challenging the band to twitch their straight-lined lips into smiles or cheers, to move their heads to bobbing, their hips to shaking. Most act apathetic, but it's just an act. I smile. I'm one of the few.

Here, and at other Downtown venues, artists can make eye contact. They can sign merchandise for a reasonable number of fans after the show. They may sell fewer tickets than at a huge auditorium, but the sound is sure to be better, and so is the relationship established with fans. Here, they get questions immediately answered. They can look the crowd in the eyes.

And they can take chances, as Ms. Loeb did on that visit. She played her set—a few songs from her latest, small-release CDs and her two mainstream hits from the 90's, "Stay" from *Reality Bites* fame, and "I Do" from her next album, *Firecracker*. Then she played requests people had made on her website, and then gathered audience requests. When she forgot the words to "Furious Rose," she took suggestions from the audience, and I even called one out. She



looked at me, thought a second, and then shook her head. "No, that's not right." After a few more suggestions, she ended up finally picking one and finishing the song. I still think I was right. Even if she is the one who wrote the song.

Lyric-forgetting is perfectly acceptable when one plays an impromptu request of work from a years-old album. It's a moment of humanity. Forgetting lyrics of new work, though, in one's set list, because the artist is clearly drunk, is much less excusable. This has happened on a few different occasions, and it is not cute. It's immature. Even if tickets are only fifteen dollars, we want our money's worth. We want respect in our little Downtown hovels. We want to see bands having a good time, but not at the expense of our hard-earned fun money.

I went on to see many other shows at The Social in the years that followed, though I had friends, Amy included, who saw many, many more, tallying their show lists and estimated monies spent on concerts at the end of the year. One year, Emily went to upwards of sixty-five shows, cataloguing the performances of acts I'd never heard of with names that sounded more like random words strung together than names that would lure me into a dark show.

The Social, and now Firestone, and sometimes Backbooth, are really the only bars to bring in big acts. Big meaning big in the indie way, selling tickets not more than twenty dollars at the door, and only ten to fifteen dollars in pre-sale at the local indie record store and its branch on the UCF campus. These shows were popular not only for their intimacy, but for the price: savvy, or should I say, cynical, students had come to appreciate the idea that the more independent performer or corporation could be, the more the message and performance were likely to be human. Even more truthful. When fewer people are meant to be reached and fewer censors satisfied, the more true the work may be to its artistic intent.

The same goes for independent restaurants and companies. Sure, lacking in corporate backing will reduce the amount of money that might be spent on aesthetics or fancy menus, but the sense of pride workers and owners take in their humble establishments more than make up for the sense of apathy I often feel in chain restaurants. Not all chains are bad, and the exception to this is the fact that, in certain neighborhoods, certain chain establishments can become a welcome and familiar part of the landscape (note the Starbucks phenomenon), and the familiarity of chains adds an automatic comfort. This is an easy explanation for one reason college students, especially lower-classmen, so often patronize them—they offer comforts of home when Mom and Dad aren't there to provide that evening meal. In this respect, most young adults aren't very different from children: we find comfort in routine, even if the ultimate result lacks in other areas (like the taste of food or price). In the end, the comfort comes back to experience, which comes back to memory. And that memory could be first-hand, or it could be hearsay, more of a cultural memory and pride, one automatically attached to a greater meaning.

The term "chain" indicates that one franchise establishment is linked to the next, producing a chain of restaurants or stores that may look slightly different but will offer the same relative comforts of menu items, prices, and atmosphere. However, "chain" also has the connotation of tying one down. The term suggests restraint, both in a corporate capacity and in the customers' power. When one is trying to satisfy so many people, often one gets caught up in assembly-line progress, leaving little room for alteration for customers with different tastes or dietary needs. Customers, too, are checked by the power these places hold—if one person never returns, the place isn't going to feel the burden. There is no reason for the wait staff to treat a

person with extra kindness, as this customer is just one of millions generating his or her paycheck. In an independent place, though, every customer matters, and I just got a twinge of guilt for writing these past five pages at my home desk instead of my favorite coffee shop, fifteen minutes away. I haven't been there in months, and I feel bad for it. After all, it is my favorite.

This culture of the “anti” marks much of the attitude of the young Central Floridian. While surrounded by corporations that we will grudgingly admit make our lives easier, we hate that our identities are so entwined in theirs. I see a familiar typeface, and it's like looking at my own name written on a form. The Publix supermarket logo, the Starbucks icon, the fonts and colors and characters that have become ingrained on our sense of cultural trust.

All this discussion of corporate strongholds sounds like adolescent bellyaching, the privileged Veruca Salts of this generation wanting it, whatever it is, and wanting it *now*. Disney is slated to support the upcoming arts center Downtown, and this could be a great move—it will have funding. The scary part is that this region has done a lot to separate its identity from that of Disney's theme parks and Disney's control. We have a good relationship, but that's all we need. We're not looking to adopt parents. We take pride in the fact that Downtown does not have to answer to a corporate parent, though of course many of the clubs have their own parents to answer to. America is built on a foundation of neighborhoods, not castles. This system is not flawless, but while tension can come with diversity, so can the incredible power to choose.

Amy and I walk to our cars in the garage near Suite B, where we began the evening at 7:30. Only now it's 2:30, and after a night of entering a friend's office building to use clean bathrooms, partaking in pizza on the sidewalk outside of I-bar, and dancing with friends from the local Brit-band Medic, along with their girlfriends, we're on our way home. I'm a little concerned about the traffic I'll face as the bars let out—I've danced out my strong Sapphire-and-gin from 8:30, but my exhaustion and sore feet in paper-thin ballet flats make me stumble, and I keep an eye out for people ready to take advantage of the slow reflexes from too much drinking, but I'm buzzing with the excitement of the night. On the dance floor, the band friends had become my friends. They all smiled when they danced. They shielded me from unwanted gyrations of strange men in a dance beyond the dance in which we took on unspoken roles of taker and taken. The music talked for us, through us. And while I knew where I could find them in the future (at Medic shows around town), where I'd seen them in the past, it was at once a sad and freeing thought to realize that, as much fun as I was having, I didn't have any of their phone numbers. Sure, I had the band's Myspace link and that of one of the band members, and that was a tenuous way to keep in touch. I didn't ask for the numbers, either.

This marked a new type of socialization, the Downtown pals. Amy was the true connector between me and them. But I was invited along by proxy. With Amy I attended their Christmas party, and one of the band members, the closest one to Amy and me, Bob, even invited Amy and me over and treated me to cocktails on my birthday. I was more than a groupie; I liked these people beyond the music. And I admired them; not only were they in a band, but, as most of their ages clustered around 30, they represented the accomplishment of a few of my goals: two were in established, live-in relationships, and all of them had very cool jobs that

seemed to make them happy and made them all some money. I was eager to move to the next level, and dancing with them was akin to eating lunch with the cool kids in the cafeteria in high school. Maybe from them, I could learn. If nothing else, I could have a little fun while sharing the same throbbing beat as everyone else.

The other thing about Downtown socialization is that familiar faces become beacons of a good night out. You recognize features of the scene that take on the faces of people, much as certain places get burned into place on that mental map. It's a good night at I-bar if I see the guy with the spiky hair and tie dancing as well as the big bald black guy with the dimples. It's a better night, of course, if all my friends are there, but then they all somehow seem to arrive on the same night. The same types of crowds who enjoy similar types of music are drawn to the same show. If you enter a bar to find people dressed in multi-colored versions of what you're wearing, you're likely to be treated to loud guitars and at least semi-intellectual lyrics. If a bunch of guys in baggy jeans and black T-shirts come in and slouch in front of the stage, the next act is likely to play something angry. Though it's likely to have great precision, the lyrics are likely not to be more than indecipherable shouts into a microphone. You find your crowd. You learn who's in the bands you like and you consider it a credit to good fortune or your good taste if you find those faces in a concert crowd. There is nowhere else to be. Even if the show doesn't turn out well, you are safe in the comfort that you aren't missing something bigger, something better. Your community is experiencing this together.

Back on the street, Amy and I make our trek from one Downtown corner to another, where we started the evening. We talk louder than we think we do because we're deafened from speakers, but everyone else is talking loudly in the early morning hours. I talk to stay engaged in

my sleepiness and to disguise my distrust of the streets I now know well enough to anticipate upcoming dark alleys. I don't really know what to look for, just anyone sizing up the contents of my pockets, their eyes on my hips.

When the bars let out, Downtown emits the electric feel of a theme park just after the fireworks, when hundreds of people trudge in a daze to the gates. The streetlights shine bright on the sidewalks, illuminating black oblong circles of gum and cracks in the pavement. There's the feel of lights just being turned on in a kitchen, when roaches scatter. We blink in the streetlight. A boy once told me I looked beautiful by streetlight.

Women stumble out of bars, falling to the sidewalk or to the arms of large men. Men shout at each other. Men clap each other on the backs. Men walk in groups with young women in negligible skirts, flirting while they talk shit about handsy guys in the bar. Groups of girls laugh together. Guys in T-shirts and girls in halter tops scarf vegan hot dogs from everyone's favorite stand. Everyone makes their way slowly to pedicabs and parking garages.

We need to leave before the Downtown sparkle completely fades. It's like a red balloon losing air, shriveling, soon to fall to the ground.

We pass a couple going the other direction, girl leaning on the guy's arm, headed to one destination. They come back our way. My suspicious glance, and then, "Which way's Church Street?" Amy and I point ahead of us in unison. "That way." A few months ago, I would not have had that quick reflex in terms of directions, along with the right answer. The details of my mental map are filling in.

While I was vigilant, I felt a camaraderie with the other people on the street. Most were young. The women coming out of Tabu and the other bootie-style clubs wore skirts so tiny the

idea that they actually covered anything was hard to believe. As one friend from out of town said, "Does everyone here dress like strippers?" They went into their caves to do their dancing under their lights and to their beats just as we did in ours. Our music and gestures and clothes and facial expressions spoke languages likely understood only in our little groups, in our little cultures, but each was likely to have a parallel in this other club. Essentially our goals were probably the same—a little release on a weekend night. Maybe a little affection on the side. And a sense of pride—this is our city. This is how we have fun.

So we walked to our cars, passing men puking in the sidewalks. One man cried out to a pedicab, "I've got a drunkard, if you'll pick us up!" Sure enough, a pedicab filled with three frat boys, one of which lagged his head with every jolt, eyes closed.

In the parking garage, a black couple shouted at each other, the woman following the man, while Amy cried behind her steering wheel. She'd been out three nights straight. The stress of one guy's confusing signals of affection weighed down on her. She had nothing to say, and neither did I. I'd danced with her. I'd danced for her and around her and moved away when someone else wanted to dance with her. She told me when I was dancing well and was eager to flail my hands to a beat my body couldn't hear when I was too off to describe. But I would never replace a real dance partner, as much fun as I could try to be. I knew how that was, and I was glad my dance partner was home or working. He didn't like clubs, and that was okay. Knowing he was there still made a difference. It took the desperation out, removed the quick checks for eyes from across the room, the stupid panic of wondering who would sidle up next to me, who might possibly wrap arms around my neck and then, later, after the fun, how I might leave him there in pools of light, wanting more. I didn't want to go back to that stress, that feeling of not

having fun, not really, but of being nakedly desperate every time a light hit. That was how I'd felt, even though it had been at times electric, exciting, and silly. I couldn't replace a dance partner, and so I had nothing to say. I got out of her car and into mine, and the man looked at me and said, "You see this lady behind me? She's crazy," and when I started my car they moved from behind it. I didn't want to be there if someone pulled out a gun. I didn't want to be a witness.

So I went home. Or at least I started out that way. At an intersection, I moved over for an approaching fire truck and missed my left turn in consequence. I wound through brick-paved neighborhoods, nearly careening into curb-parked cars, going faster than intended and reminded of that by the squeaking of my shocks on bumps in the brick.

When I got lost, I didn't panic. I tried to retrace my steps mentally so I could turn around if I had to. I saw the neighborhood as a slanted grid, tried to get myself to the main road without a 3:00 a.m. panic. I was known to panic, to cry, to stop breathing and wonder who would find me, and what might be done to punish a little girl lost in the suburban woods.

And then, there it was, my Mecca—Highway 50, dreaded by daylight for its ugliness and the way the sun hit it, in blinding rays that superceded the colors of the traffic lights placed every three blocks. But at night, this was the artery. The great fluorescent line that leads home, or at least to the streets and curves that glide me home in half-sleep, which is basically what I do at 3:00 a.m.

In the dark, my apartment never feels the same. The walls are closer together than they were before, the cats confused, the shower floor more slippery than before. But I have to shower. I have to wash other people's sweat off my shoulders, their fingertips off my backs,



their breath in smoke out of my hair. Toward the end of the night, the lit tips of cigarettes dart everywhere, dangerously close to noses, shoulders, hands whipping with the music. They burn on the floor, dangerously close to toes in sandals and my peek-a-boo flats. Home, all is water. While it normally drums against the tub, now it hums under the din of the left-over music in my ears. Behind the thrum and the hum, home is quiet. Cold, wet, clean hair. A TV with the calm of canned laughter, the same Seinfeld jokes over and over: line, pause, line, laughter. This rhythm is what I crave, that slow rhythm superimposing the pounding beat of the club, with the epileptic lights that nearly gave me a migraine. I close my eyes, turn them from the TV, wishing I could turn off the screen but not the sound. A cat paws my belly, settles down, and it's only then that I'm aware that I smell like soap. My hair soaks through the couch pillow. Mom taught me never to go to bed with wet hair or I'll catch a cold, but I don't have the strength to lift a hair dryer. Even though it's been hours since my drink, I'm spinning, my heart racing. Somewhere between contentment and absolution I find an intrinsic restlessness. This is my inner Florida cowboy, five generations strong. The drive of my Irish predecessors on the other side of the family, driving stakes into Illinois railroad ties, hosting visitors to the World's Fair from their kitchen-turned-inn. That was how my grandmother's grandparents met. No meat market for them. Just four days one year, four days the next, and then marriage.

The music and lights try to speed up history. Producers and DJs blend '80's classics with single-hits from the '90's using millennial technology. We're wrapped up in forces stronger than us—forces instinctual, forces evolutionary, forces economical and commercial. We're wrapped up in an activity we hope will mean more when we can step out and examine it. Because this can't be a waste of time. It can't just be a deficit in brain cells and a deadening of nerves. It has to be

an experience worth something, and all we know is that, at these crucial moments of immersion, we don't know what they mean yet.

Now, is that because we lack the capacity to know or because we instinctively strive to keep ourselves young, fresh, even if that means being just a little big naive?

Downtown Orlando, Central Station Bar. It's nothing but a rectangular room, stools and tables surrounding a wooden bar, bare-shouldered bartenders pouring drinks and leaning across counters. Their hair has been caught in rubber bands that hold it in unkempt masses on the backs of their heads. My eyes adjust to the smoke-filled room. No food served here, so smoking is okay. I'd parked in the nearby garage, ended up on a different street, walked too close to a girl in jeans on the sidewalk when I veered away from a homeless man. "Sorry," I said. "It's okay," she said, and gave me a wary look of slow understanding. I was not after her clutch purse. We commiserated in fear and common sense.

Turns out, we were both going to the same place. She went into the bar while I dug my driver's license, creased in half from so many nights of sliding into cars with it still tight in my pocket, from the hip of my jeans. I smile at the door guy when I give him my crumpled five, but when the guy next to him hits on me, I cut him my patented, "Are you kidding?" look. It's supposed to come off as *yeah, right*, but the true, immediate reaction is of genuine surprise. Still.

Tonight, the only man I want anything to do with is my boyfriend. He's getting off of work at the newspaper at around the same time Medic should be done playing, and all I really want to do is sit on the couch next to him. To lean on him. My best friend's husband just cheated on her. I don't know this bar, I don't know this guy on the street, and I have this to hold

on to: after I'd told my boyfriend about my friend's husband's indiscretions, he said, "She should kick him to the curb." So I had that. No excuses on the behalf of all malekind. I didn't know where to be safe, not forever, but I had that.

In the bar I saw Amy immediately, with her side-parted brown hair draping into her face in perfect indie-rock fashion. Slender Jill, with her rectangle-framed glasses, was seated at a table with Jason, a curly-haired video-game developer. The stage was tucked into the very back corner, and the band set up while the lead singer of the band to follow sat at the table in front of ours, writing a set list.

My confession: I don't always enjoy going to shows. I don't like the smoke, and I don't like finding parking, and, when I feel like talking, it's impossible to do over the noise. I just go home hoarse. But usually the pluses trump the minuses: I get to see my friends, I get some fairly cheap entertainment, I get to drink, and if I get there early enough and/or stay late enough, I can get plenty of talking time in. The morning after, when I think back to where I went and what I did, nervous as I may have been to brave the crowded city streets and park alone, I will inevitably feel proud and consider the ringing in my ears and the lingering stench of smoke in my hair a testament to being twenty-four.

## Concert T

At the Jenny Lewis concert for her solo tour, the crowd was made up of the indie-rock dating pool, slightly grown up from the Thursday-night Independent Bar crowd. These were the college grads, grad students, website designers, coffee fetchers. Men and women, straight and curved alike, every eye was drawn to the glittering hem of the folk-country princess's hip-length skirt, even if they didn't want to be. A show is much more than music. Everyone was there to unwind on a Friday night. Lacquered bangs had a little more floppy body than those in the I-bar crowd, a little hang from the face, and girls had pinned up their razored hair into something slightly different from the next girl over.

The merch table was next to the door, and everyone eyed the T-shirts as they went in. I had three choices. The one that caught my eye first featured a cowboy with a thought bubble reading, "Hot Damn" in cartoonish characters, and beneath his shaded black banana were the words "Jenny Lewis and The Watson Twins Tour 2006" in the same marker felt font, same size as above, nearly ignorable. Next to that was the shirt I ended up buying, a black one in the design and font of a Wanted poster, with a rectangular black-and-white picture of a wrangler flipping a gun so fast his hand was just a blur. On the top, this was bordered by the title of a politically-left song from the album, "The Big Guns," and Jenny Lewis's name bordered beneath the picture. It provoked questions while, for those in the know, offering some irony with the song title, and proudly promoted the artist's name. The third shirt, white with red writing, said only "Born Secular, -Jenny Lewis." While this was my favorite song on the album, this shirt was the most plain, and when you're a girl buying a shirt for fifteen dollars, you want frills.

One of my defining characteristics is that I *cannot* make decisions. I'm terrified of making a commitment, though I want people to commit to me. Then I'll commit to them. Thing is, inanimate objects, those things that matter the least, don't offer their loyalty. So how do you make a decision? I spent the opening acts picturing myself in each of these T-shirts between sips of my gin-and-tonic. Even as I spoke to my friend, I imagined what others might think: "Hot Damn" was fun and sexy, but could I wear that in front of my parents? And, if the cowboy is supposed to be talking about a girl, maybe it wouldn't be appropriate for me to wear such a shirt. The "Big Guns" one featured guns, and I worried about my political preferences being misconstrued if I wore this phrase. But isn't the intention ironic, at least for those who'd heard the album, as the song used imagery and song stylings from the old west to sell Democratic ideals? And weren't those who would get the irony, the ones who knew the artist and album, the ones who mattered, anyway? Wasn't I trying to get their attention, to announce that I was *in* by wearing a shirt from this concert?

I put my thoughts on hold for the opener, a very drunk twenty-three-year-old guitarist who first won some of my respect because he was my age and then touring, but then lost it because he could barely hold a sentence, let alone stand. I was amazed that he still managed to hold the guitar, and, in fact, he made it through the entire show, playing some rip-roaring solos during the headliner's act.

Months later, I would learn that he and Jenny were an item. She appeared on his tour and in his music video. And a pairing that I probably would have found interesting in other circumstances, as I found her collaborations with Ben Gibbard, seemed more creepy—and like a possible marketing ploy, which the others could have been as well—than anything else.

The show itself was fantastic. The crowd was warm and inviting, though not very inclined to dance. Jenny and the Watson Twins entered the stage in black evening gowns, Jenny's different to set her apart, as if her auburn hair and shorter stature didn't already. After a few songs, the women were off for a costume change, and returned in sparkly sheath dresses reminiscent of The Supremes. With half-smiles, sidelong looks into the audience, they vamped. If I could find any sort of connection beyond political ideals, it was in the adjective *cute*. Jenny had been called cute in reviews, and I'd been called cute by my friends and lovers and family throughout the years. Cute is something society decides you are, and cute is something you try to define for yourself. And here was a woman, just a few years older than me and probably the same height, singing of very sincere issues of romance and alcohol and dependency and religion for packed houses of the indie-cult-following variety with a voice clear enough to cut glass.

Like any seasoned performer, she knew what she was doing. She knew the effect that skirt would have on the men dragged to the show by their girlfriends. She knew how her legs looked, her hair, how to dance to accentuate what she had and what she wanted from the audience. And I don't know of any woman in that club who didn't want to be her.

On the way back to the car, I talked nonstop about Halloween plans, how I just *had* to fashion a dress like that. I imagined the right length to show off the shape of my legs, what shoes I would wear, how I might figure out an indie twist to my un-indie curly hair.

As far as emulating certain musicians, I know my limits. I'm not great at playing the guitar—I think too much about it. The only singing I do is in my car, and my closet related fantasy is to sing in a local band.

After waiting in the merch line after the show, I brought my shirt home and hung it up next to the others I'd accumulated through the years: my red The Sounds shirt with Sweden written across the back and my Rilo Kiley shirt, which I wore nearly non-stop for a year and now had a quarter-sized pink bleach stain on the bottom. These shirts brought me comfort on airplanes to and from unfamiliar places, in bed on bad days, and after workouts. They made me proud to identify with something other than a retail brand.

And today, after coming home late from the concert and waking up four hours later to take my boyfriend to the airport, and then sinking into the couch for intermittent sleep for the rest of the day, I was in a terrible mood. My first impulse was to grab my new shirt and a slitted jean skirt I hadn't worn for a couple of years. I wondered if it would offer the same comfort as the old, black Rilo Kiley shirt had.

As a kid, I would dress in my gingham Dorothy Halloween costume to watch *The Wizard of Oz*. As a teenager, I babysat a boy who wore a tattered Batman T-shirt every day. Children don't have a problem grabbing a My Little Pony or Power Rangers lunchbox and immediately becoming those characters while they eat their lunches. Is there something so taboo about twenty-somethings gaining a little comfort from the T-shirts advertising their favorite bands?

Since the product-placement-filled cartoons of the '80s, is there really a big difference between advertising and emulating a character?

I realize that the artist the T-shirt is promoting probably doesn't wear the shirt. And there's an unspoken rule that you're not to wear the shirt for a certain band if you are seeing them in concert. The big difference between me wearing my "Big Guns" or Rilo Kiley shirt and

a five-year-old boy wearing the crest of Batman across his chest is that Batman actually wears this symbol on his chest. By looking like Batman, the child becomes Batman in his mind. By blazing a band's name across my chest, I'm promoting the band and showing off part of my identity—through what I like—and communicating to others who understand what it might mean to like this band and what their music might say about me and my other interests at the same time.

But it is a way of connecting with the artist, perhaps through a similarity in taste or humor. If I really wanted to emulate the artist, I would grow my hair long, straighten it and then loose-curl it every day, get those thick, side-angle bangs that are all the rage. I would lament not having bigger eyes or more delicate cheekbones or for not being more dainty altogether. I would have to take more fashion risks—as a friend who caught a glimpse of this artist at a local restaurant on the afternoon of the show said, “They were wearing funky clothes, so I figured they must be important.” The funkier the clothes, the higher the level of confidence. The higher the level of confidence, the more important one must be.

Being labeled cute is a great fallback. Cuteness is a great excuse for mistakes, for embarrassment that causes a red face, for a fumbling vocabulary, for losing my shoe on the sidewalk, for running into walls.

But one doesn't just want to be cute. That implies inadequacy, that one must be excused for something, that one really doesn't have more wherewithal than a two-year-old.

For years, I've tried to figure out where I fit—can one be two-year-old cute and a serious, burgeoning adult? I think it has to do with awareness and attitude. If you're aware of how people see you, as a child or a sex symbol or a nerd, then you can use that power. I saw this in



Lewis's high notes. She sang with her eyes closed, with the vulnerability of having to remove one's foot from a rock in order to lunge to the next foothold, then opened her eyes, marched to an amp, stood up, and raised her arms to the crowd. She knew how this looked. She knew people would flash their cameras even though signs had strictly prohibited them and that videos would flash all over YouTube. She knew exactly what she was doing.

Like my friend said during an a capella song about a week-long dating sequence, she was playing to her demographic. It's no secret that we all play to our demographics. We change our hair to adapt to the crowd at a particular club. We millennials know our brand names and the marks of them. We know how much each particular shirt cost, whether or not it was sewn in a sweatshop, and what those things mean to the various subcultures.

The key is to own the cuteness, to give power by showing off and leaving something to the audience to take as they will, and then, gauging from the response, to reel it back in with the hook of an eyebrow. To decide how far you are willing to go and work within the elasticity of the limits you set.

If attitude is it then, and a T-shirt is just a piece of cotton, then that little boy is not really Batman. However, if he believes he is, then maybe his mother can convince him that Batman would pick up his toys in order to help prevent chaos in Gotham City because even Bruce Wayne has a day job.

We haven't lost touch with those five-year-old selves who see themselves on that stage in sparkling dresses—my face gets warm from the heat of a crowd's cheers just thinking about it. But we're also at the age where we can respect those on stage. I hope that all of us have found at

least one true talent, at least one occupation that drives our passion and offers us an activity and community to identify with.

And here we are, amass, cheering along to the lyrics from “Rise Up With Fists” that mention Orlando, even though it’s for being “in the belly of the beast,” provoking issues of commercialization that the album reacts against. As much as I want to be the best me I can be, I have to admit to wanting to be her, just a little bit, as I wanted to be The Little Mermaid when I was eight. I knew it wasn’t possible to grow a fin and make a prince fall in love with me with just my voice, but it was a nice story.

And there I was, sixteen years later, pressing my way to a slot at the merch table to buy the shirt I’d debated all evening with throngs of other twenty-something females. Supporting an indie label and an artist we felt we related to by promoting her album through T-shirts. And today, in my black shirt already studded with cat hair, am I any more me?

## Indie Pin-up Santa Claus

Santa Claus was a lie, even though this was not much surprise. It all made sense in my head. It was a feeling, an idea, a metaphor for Jesus and God's love and the Holy Spirit, always there but not really explained. Sure, I talked about it, whether or not Santa existed, with my friends, and some were very upset about Christmas disappointments that proved no one was listening to their hopes. Others said this to scare younger brothers and sisters. For me, it was belief beyond logic. I didn't worry whether Santa would have trouble coming down the chimney. He would or he wouldn't. Could be Dad. Did it matter? I got to make cookies, got to open presents, got to leave out milk and cookies for him, carrots and celery for the reindeer. A dream celebrated by all of us, without question. A fantasy one year solidified with dirty boot prints on the living room carpet, which were actually kind of creepy. And the last year we left cookies out, I woke up at 3:00 a.m. to a knock at my window. If it was Santa, I didn't want to know.

The Easter Bunny in the mall made jerky movements. I leaned on the edge of his hard knee, smiled for a picture. Followed Mom behind the display to the other side of the mall, back to where blue and yellow wires curled under his furry white rear end. I'd sat upon a robot. I didn't tell Mom.

The Tooth Fairy was where we cleared it up. Would I get money for a lost tooth? At what age does it become inappropriate for a mother to enter her daughter's bedroom, ease a few coins or rolled-up dollar bills beneath her pillow? At what age does the daughter wake up, look at that familiar cotton nightgown, haloed by the blur of sleep, and release the mother from the

fantasy? "It's not real, is it?" "No." Her head tilts, mine nods. Chest deflates. I eye her closed palm. "This year, may I still have the money?"

Disney World was like Santa Claus, a non-reality. A place that lives in its own creation, that plays by its own rules, that never questions itself, so you don't question it. The characters always freaked me out, the ones completely dressed up. I watched the face characters from a distance, wondering how these girls were born so lucky as to look exactly like Snow White and Cinderella. But I didn't want to hear their voices, pinched high and tight from their places in the movies.

Sometimes the fantasy wears down into the truth. To be fair, the truth can change with time, too. The truth behind what you want can change. One day, I was thanking my boyfriend for being so good to me (compared to how a friend's abusive boyfriend treated her). I leaned up on my tip-toes, wrapped my arms around his neck, looked into his green eyes, and said, "Thank you for being a good guy." I kissed him. He kissed back. He took pictures of me with his cell phone, set me as his display screen. I was his wallpaper. I did the same with his picture. At parties, he patted his knee, and I rolled my eyes and sat on his lap. Kissed him on the cheek. Three months later, I was the one who ended it. In a car phone conversation, on the interstate to my parents' house from my roommate's wedding, with Bright Eyes in the background singing "First Day of My Life": "If you want to be with me/with these things there's no telling, we'll just have to wait and see/but I'd rather be working for a paycheck than waiting to win the lottery/besides maybe this time it's different, I mean I really think you like me."

The wedding had been a pageant, set in the center of a huge resort hotel with a greenhouse ceiling. The only real glitch was the gigantic big-screen TV on the wall opposite our

place in the atrium, blazing with silent flashes of everyday TV life while my best friend and her boyfriend said their vows and kissed in front of everyone. My flowers shook in my hands, but I didn't cry. At the end, I ushered the mother-in-law out of the honeymoon suite, where she wanted to make sure the rose petals had been scattered and the champagne chilled. They would not have liked her there—but I had a task, to leave the presents. I, who'd been on the other side of their closed door for years, should have been the last to see the room. Not the mother-in-law. Children at twenty-one or not, they were the ones getting married.

The longest day of my life. Still before the big phone call, I met my parents back at the apartment where we spent three hours moving me out, after serendipitously signing into an apartment in the complex next door. Something had just opened up, and I'd had thirty minutes to get from hotel to leasing office and sign.

So there we were. Once I was shut into the car, nothing but black pavement, white lines, and sedans and trucks all around, everything rushed in, seemingly through my eyes and ears first. Memory is sometimes a reverse-sensory experience.

Us bridesmaids had talked about love the night before. Love and giving too much and not giving any at all. The feeling of having a bra unclasped, the light clicking off, nothing between you. Love.

So I called him, way up there in the other corner of the country, and he told me he'd ridden his bike up and down the hills to buy his roommate (and fellow cross-country traveler) a bottle of liquor for his birthday. The hills had been so steep he'd had to walk. I saw this image of him, proud and determined and feeling more and more angry with every pedal stroke. Had he stayed, he'd have a job, even if it wasn't fulfilling. He wouldn't have to bike down the hill for a

prize bottle of liquor. He wouldn't have to describe it to me. I wouldn't have to try to imagine it, to try to feel the wind in my jacket, to try to feel what he feels. We would ride bikes together in the park because we both wanted to. We wouldn't have to discuss it because we'd both have felt it.

Had he stayed, he'd be with me.

So I talked about the wedding, how I'd had my doubts at first, but that I knew she really loved him and how I really hoped they'd be okay. "The First Day of My Life" came up on my Bright Eyes CD, and I turned the volume so I could just hear the guitar under the voice on the phone. "You know, that Bright Eyes song is just like us. I hear, 'I'd rather be working for a paycheck than waiting to win the lottery, and that's you on the hill with liquor for your roommate in your backpack. Only I'm not there. I'm just imagininig you on that hill. And it's hard for me to watch.'"

"I didn't know what those lyrics meant before. It's a tough metaphor, you know? But I think I get it now." I took a deep breath, knowing that if I said this, I would seal it. I would seal away what was us. "You can have a little at a time and work for it or you can wait forever and have it all at once. The fairy tale ending." He was silent on the other end. I could have said more, could have possibly saved it, but I thought of him rolling his eyes, anxious to get back on his bike, to tackle another hill. Without me. I was tired from those midnight phone calls to save money, imagining him eating nothing but the crackers his mother sent, and pretending to be proud of it. For getting out there and taking risks without me. For experiencing life without me.

Finally, I heard him breathe. "I'm not ready for a conversation about love, if that's where you're going."

My breath came and went in a ragged jerk. I didn't want to spill my tears into the phone, but it was too late. He knew I was crying. I could have hung up the phone, apologized for being tired and emotional. Instead, I kept the phone to my ear and sobbed, my chest collapsing like the plastic-bag lung inside a CPR baby.

The cool, rational part of me said, "It's only been a few months," but the angry, tired, hurt part of me roared fire over that. I didn't want him to hear me cry, but the tears were there. "Don't let Bright Eyes write your life," the cool voice said, gulf water with waves licking the sand. But it was too late. Bright Eyes was right. And my boyfriend's calls had been coming farther and farther between. I'd visited, and there'd been distance. Judgment on both our parts, unspoken anger. He did nothing wrong in the conversation. He said nothing to hurt me, nothing to end it. But the thought of hanging up and waiting for another phone call was too much to bear.

I don't remember what I said. I suppose I could if I tried harder, but I don't want to. Besides, we still talked after that. We laughed and discussed song lyrics and getting drunk. I worried about him. Felt glad when he found work, sad when I realized that meant he was getting more settled. There was a chance of something. Of him changing his mind. Of us remaining friends, me moving out there after grad school, us becoming a couple again.

The last time I spoke to him, I was drunk. This is too complicated, silly, and dramatic to explain, but in essence (jealous), I intercepted a call he made to a mutual friend who happened to be in my apartment. I don't know what I was testing. My point was to her, not him, really, that, I don't know, I still had some control. In all likelihood, I probably confirmed the opposite. The conversation lasted maybe thirty seconds. He sounded confused. And then he went back to his

call with her and I seethed on the couch and decided I was being stupid and that, even if this girl didn't know she'd been playing a game, she had won. Relationships shouldn't be reduced to contests.

With him, everything was the most simple and the most complicated at the same time. With him, I learned the complexity and intensity wrapped up in four little letters.

Then that was it.

My own disillusionment? After all, I'd technically done the breaking-up. And I did the breaking.

Then came Wes. I want to keep him sacred instead of writing myself out of a relationship, so I won't say much. I want to find the illusion of that first, childlike romance again, before I developed the reaction to flinch.

The anticipation of a kiss being almost better than the kiss.

The feeling of potential.



## The Thing About Vinyl is That it Can Melt

It's not really the idea that she might currently or in the past have been a cokehead. Or that Orlando might be "Scorelando" to this and many other bands. That because she's pretty and sings about sex she might be a slut. It's not that they made the decision to make more money, to listen to the record company, to write more like more popular bands. Well, maybe it is that, a little bit.

It's that there are songs and albums I really connect to. That may be autobiographical—maybe not—but, regardless they hit an emotional nerve in which tone, lyric, chord, and instrument converge. Tension hits a climax, and thoughts I can't express tingle through my fingertips and earlobes. Connection. And then learning that something in this connection may not be organic at all, that only four of the songs on your favorite album may have been originally intended and the rest are record-company guesses at what us kids want. Not organic at all. Could all the great music be reduced to the coincidence that certain words just sound good together and hit pressure points of feelings that may be separate from meaning? Could it all come down to focus-group marketing? My friends and I are drawn to independent-label music because the craft—the theme, the combination of talent in musicians, the sound, the experimentation—is supposed to come first.

So what if the band owns up to the decision to change their sound? They might want a change. They might have changed as individuals, shed their emo/indie-pop ways.

If this statement were made overtly in a *Filter* interview, would the listeners buying the albums be agreeing to before-unspoken contracts—I'll buy if you'll pay? Or play?

If we care about more than about how the music sounds, but what it says in lyric and in cultural undertone, these things matter. Is this selling out, doing this and then owning up to it? Are we supposed to find it ironic? Can we trust the songs, the energy on the stage? Has indie-rock, our last refuge from the record-company filters, betrayed us, just when we hoped the labels might be leaning our way?

Or do some people just want to disillusion, to anger others? Either way, there's bound to be disappointment, from friends or from musicians. Can we still cling to the songs we love, trying not to wonder? Can we still try to meet performers' eyes on stage, hoping they see us through the lights, us as more than oily wads of cash we've cleared tables and sorted through sentences at writing centers and mopped other people's sweat off our own backs for? Or is this simply a reality check, a big sister looking down with know-all eyes and a smirk: one day, you'll understand. Just like you half-understand the sadness and irony and shame and, above all, the joke in the lyrics now. "You've got your moneymaker," with its pornographic undertone. That's for the mainstream audience—the detachment and the irony that this is this band's moneymaker is for us. One day, you'll have your own jokes. One day, you'll be nothing less than a hundred-thousand-dollar kid, too, and you'll sing about your mom doing blow but not about your own razors and mirrors and bloody nose. Even though the truth is still there, wavering in the air above the audience, the truth half-dressed, while you lace up your stockings under the shortest short shorts and flip your hair and pretend you don't know you're cute, though all eyes are on you. And they're screaming and crying and jealous, when all you've really made

are a few marketing decisions, a few friends, a few chords wound with a few words inside the tension of a guitar string wrapped so tight around a peg that looking at it hurts.

But I want to love their music! Last week, I was thrilled about concert tickets, about the anticipation of their new CD, going a different way but that was okay, hoping they'd make a mark, a difference for other indies in the big-label world. But what's real and what's simple entertainment, a beat to dance to? Kelly Clarkson, Celine Dion, and Avril Levine do it, and I don't see a problem with that. Thing is, they never tried to be anything beyond simple, high-school entertainment. Do we impose this added value on indie bands?

My friend's husband said he hadn't loved her for a year. I would have left him then, which I know is easier to say than to do. This love lie is the ultimate betrayal—stronger than cheating, stronger than sharing flesh. The love lie, even told to her, is an ice pick between my ribs. My chest hurt for three days. I got in the car, and I couldn't breathe. Out came the angry music, that Avril Levine song with the painful, childish yelling meant for millions of people to tap into. Had that many people been that hurt? Had more songs been written about love ending than love sticking?

Over the summer, I'd programmed guys' numbers into my cell phone. I friended their head-shots on Myspace. At one point, walking from my apartment to this friend's, I juggled between in-coming text messages from two guys, hoping I wouldn't slip and send a message responding to Jason's banter to James instead. Every chime of my phone heightened my flattery and anxiety. And though I knew that this was the game of dating, that if you met and kissed a guy on a dance floor, the chances were you weren't the first (though he was the first and only such encounter for you), and this behavior was probably commonplace, as everyone knew that

dating was a numbers game, all about the odds. Still, I felt guilty. Neither knew about the other. And after finally going on the date with the dance-floor guy and realizing that we really had nothing at all in common, stringing us together, I was finally released from my guilt and could focus on just the other guy. On our second date, he confessed to his past two relationships ending because he'd cheated on the ladies. Maybe he'd expected some sort of praise for telling me the truth, but he'd already spent the evening ignoring me at a party.

"You don't deserve me," I said. I was surprised by how firm my words sounded. I was surprised I'd said them. I was tired of second chances.

"I know," he said. I nodded and led him to the door.

By the end of the summer, I was exhausted. My numbers theory was shot. While I had gained some confidence, I decided I was fishing in the wrong pool. So I went to a coffee shop show with friends, ready to shrug it off. And then I saw Wes, and I talked to him. What did I have to lose? And we didn't stop talking. If there's a lesson in that, I don't know what it is. After learning of my friend's husband's cheating, I drove through my own, private fog. I mixed angry music for my cycling classes. Loud guitars. Lyrics that verged on inappropriate and required quick twists of the volume knob to catch an occasional f-bomb or goddamn. The members praised the high energy. I rode hard, though the apex of each pedal stroke marked impossibility, when I should have felt strongest. My calf jellied there before pushing through. If he had done this to me, what had he done to her?

If I had been near them, my shoulders might have broken through their weakness and strangled him. Every breath I took in was already sodden, heavy with the lie of love, the betrayal of the most elemental, sacred kind.

I could never see him again. I'd known him for five years, warmed to my friend's love for him, and now he could just disappear. And I didn't know what to say to my friend, so for the two weeks between buying my plane tickets and taking a weekend's visit, I called her every night. Called her and listened. The last thing she needed was to feel a friend's betrayal, too, which was how she would take it if I tried to push her in any direction. So I called with jelly wrists and an ice pick in my chest. I listened to her, and then I folded myself into the cushion of Wes's couch and I leaned on him. I called my mom. I spread our grief like peanut butter over my world. Every surface, every desk, every trip to the computer to read email, was coated in brown goo, the finger-tracking protein of betrayal. The ultimate fear: that love will be a lie, even if the person lying is you, to yourself.

Months after writing this, I have some power to reflect. First, on my friend's relationship: I miss the calls. This is true. As uneven as that relationship may, at times, be, I will probably never grow out of my jealousy. This is a sad fact. But I can't say I haven't been guilty of this behavior myself, forgetting the rest of the world outside of me and my own relationship.

As for the band, I saw them in concert very recently, touring that album of mixed reviews. I was afraid it would be a disappointment, and I entered the big venue ready for anything. And it was a fantastic show. Sure, the band was much farther away, but they played songs from all their albums. Without big stage theatrics and lighting tricks, they performed. The performance gave a new listen to the album, and I was surrounded by Amy and other friends, some of whom had only heard a few songs before. They liked what they heard. They bobbed their heads in the small space we had for movement.

As they rolled through songs from each of their past four albums, I realized that a big reason this music means something to me has nothing to do with the band at all. Sure, I've often felt that the cute-angry character of the music reflected my own emotional state and that many of the lyrics related to my experiences, but it was more than that. More, even, than the mood of the music, which happened to hit me at the right time in my life and the right time in the cultural movement. But beyond that, each song serves as a personal timeline. Images, smells, and tastes are embedded in the chords. And when I'd turned to the same songs for comfort at later points in my life, that new, emotional meaning layered on as well. At the concert, some of these images surprised me. But I kept myself at a distance from the memories. After all, the songs didn't make me do anything. The songs hadn't brainwashed me. While I'd sometimes thought they were speaking for me, maybe they'd only spoken through me. Perhaps this is a sign that I've grown in the past three years. Perhaps this is a sign of maturity. And perhaps this is why pop music is important—it holds all of these truths, universal and from memory—in its sound waves. Nothing tangible can be held by anything tangible. And maybe that's why the emotions seem to slide through all the spaces between the words I write: not even hundreds of pages full of words will ever be woven tightly enough to hold all of that layered emotion in.

The band members smiled when the audience sang and laughed when they spilled beer on themselves. They actually seemed like they were having fun, like maybe this was more than just another show after five years of tours, which began when Lewis was the same age I was when I started listening. They looked surprised, as bands in these big venues usually are, that kids in Orlando were actually invested enough to flood the floor and scream with their arms up. Surprised that people in this corporate city could care.

“Did you see us at The Social?” Ms. Lewis asked. Half the audience cheered.

“They remember that place?” a friend of mine asked. They could have just been prompted, but I’d like to think they remember that small stage. That in one of Jenny Lewis’s solo songs, when she’d referenced “drinking in the Orlando streets, in the belly of the beast,” she had a particular intersection in mind. There are always puddles that look deep but are instead shallow reflections of the bars’ lights against the night. There is only one Orlando, but few see the city I call home: they see the area I avoid by the theme parks, with the pastel, themed restaurants and drunk convention-attendees staggering on medians, leaning dangerously close to the traffic in the street. Few see the dark doors and squat bungalows that house the restaurants, coffee shops, and bars I’ve learned to call home. There’s only one Florida, only one Sarasota with award-winning sand, and I hope this state tourist trap ends up meaning something more than the promise of posed photographs to those who look for more. I hope that not everyone expects to only pass through.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FORWARD MOTION

### On the Swing Set: An Essay in Vignettes

*Wofford College, South Carolina, 2007*

Home is the swing set. Wanting to freeze each moment of the trajectory.

Walking tonight around an old, tiny campus in South Carolina. Magnolia tree, wind in leaves. Courtyard gates. Buildings constructed in 1910. Swing, sounds, quiet, permission. Someone I know says she needs the permission smoking allows. What about permission to sit? Is that why I walk and run and bike, for permission to take a break without breaking? Sounds of train, birds, ambulance, leaves rustling, no creak from the swing. Footprints. Remembering beach, letting the day just fall away. Resisting the quiet with parents while wind whispers through dry sea oats. Embracing quiet myself. Feeling, tonight, like I might be trespassing. A common thought without that name. Notice greening wood, wetness, unsettled boards. The swing hangs from a wooden beam in a courtyard in the corner of a dorm building. People kiss here. Romantic moments. Figure things out and release questions. Let the swing stop. Sit still. Make yourself sit still and look at the bird on the low branch, the brown bird rinsed in red. Put your weight on your feet to stand. Crushed cigarette butts fill the sand. At least a hundred, unnoticed in your reverie of kisses, of concerns. Back through the gate, an unexpected blue jay streaks overhead. Stop. Hold your breath. Wish your stillness could bring him back.

My dad built an A-frame swing set out of dark-colored wood for my sisters and brothers when they were kids, back in the '70s. Through the decades, he replaced the seats of swings, and



every few years he dug up the legs and he and my brother coated the feet in black tar socks. On cold December days, the trapeze that had survived my sisters was smooth, and it rubbed the inside of my right knee raw. I wore shorts as deep into the season as I could just to feel the bar holding me up, my arms parallel to the chains, right leg looped over the bar. Every December, I took a deep breath, almost one year older, and I dove forward head first, every time depending on my hands to hang on, for the inside of my knee to catch me, and I pulled myself around and up and then dove down again. When I got tired, I hung from both knees, each year my fingers dangling closer to the ground. The cold air hugged my belly in the waning light.

One year, my fingers hit dirt. One hand dangled while the other held up my shirt. I knew then the swing set would go. But it stayed in the yard for years. For my sister's kids, Dad said. But I'd like to think that it wasn't even for me. That it was for him, for the nails he'd driven and the tar he'd painted. For the way it reached into the oak trees he loved so much, the apex of the frame meeting in a point the way the eaves of a house meet in the roof. A house without walls. A house with invisible children sailing on the swings when everyone else has run in from the rain. In the gray mist is where the ghosts hide. The thunder covers their giggles. And under their weight, nothing more than the weight of rain, the rusty chains forget to squeal.

### *Orlando*

Dumbo's blue skin hot against my palm, the elephant smiles in the glare of the sun. Dad helps me in, metal burning my knee, and the excitement of anticipated ascent fills my belly. For two and a half hours in line, we've watched these elephants rise, one after another, in a two-by-two circle. They rose, they fell, they rose again, each elephant wearing a different-colored scarf

and geared for flight, each elephant a big-eared Dumbo, even though in the movie there was only one.

That's not what I think of then, not of Dumbo, not of suspension of disbelief. Twenty Dumbos, nearly identical, is nothing to question. This one is mine. This one will raise me to the clouds.

Dad climbs to my side and points to the bar that's already sweaty inside my hand. "Hold on tight," he says. The ground is already so far away, and all those people are watching from the line. Every one of them wants an elephant. Maybe I should give them mine. My heart beats in my ears, pulses my palms, and the harder I hold, the more slippery the bar gets. This is what I waited for, and what if my Dumbo falls from the sky? What if I slide off this metal seat and fall to the ground, the way I would jump from a swing, right at the crest of its motion, all that hot air a hammock of nothing, my stomach caught somewhere in the tree above until I hit the firm, firm ground?

Mom's down there somewhere, with a camera. We've all been waiting for this, my ride in the elephant. I think I might cry behind my blue Mickey Mouse sunglasses.

Very slowly, the ride takes off. The ground slides backward beneath us.

"You ready?" Dad asks. I take a deep breath, and the elephant glides into the air. My stomach stays behind, with those people on the ground, in line and ringing around the ride.

We pick up speed, soar higher, so high I'm weightless.

Dad points below. "See Mom?" I look, but I don't see her. I see colors, colors everywhere, in shirts, in buildings, in other rides, in other elephants' hats and scarves. I look

behind, to each side, to the front. Lots of women with strollers, children with candy, men with pig-tailed girls on their shoulders. Mickey Mouse ears stud the crowd.

And we drop. Just a little. Fluidly. The elephant next to us moves up while we move down. And then we're gliding up again. And then sliding down, right where we started. And we're rising. This time around, I look out for Mom, waiting in the sun. Mom, with her camera to capture my white lace bonnet and smile. Mom, very pregnant. Mom, who doesn't like rides anyway. They make her sick.

The picture will reveal my sunburned cheeks, my lips curling somewhere between disgust and a smile. The look of the anxious. Eyes hidden behind blue-framed sunglasses with Mickey Mouse's head in the middle.

What will stay with me from this day? Not waiting in line. Not a Mickey Mouse ice cream cone. Not fireworks. Not my mother's pregnancy. The pictures will take me back, and so will my palms every time I touch a steering wheel that's been baked through a car's windshield.

I have the glare of the sun, the heat of Dumbo's cheek against my hand. The carousel, Dad helping me up onto the shiny saddle of a lavender horse, a nylon belt fastening me to the gold, braided pole. Hot metal soldering the insides of my thighs to the horse's flanks.

The Orlando I used to know straddled the map between Kissimmee, or the land of Disney, and my aunt and uncle's house in a suburban neighborhood off of Orange Blossom Trail. When I moved to Orlando as a college freshman in 2001, all I knew was the university's campus and all the toll roads it took to get to its place on the eastern edge of town. I lived on campus for

two years, and for that time, I called its wide paths and trees full of squirrels and '60's-era-brick buildings my home.

While everyone else in the dorm except for the girl on the crew team slept their mornings away, I woke at 7:00 to run, passing one room with a sign outside that said, "Check your watch! If it's 2:00, PLEASE wake me up for class!" For most college freshmen who were not on sports teams, 7:00 a.m. was an unseen hour. My physical home might have changed, but if I had my way, the home I'd made in my muscles wouldn't. Still mostly asleep, I tied my shoes under the always-lit fluorescent lights of the common area. I took the stairs down four floors, as I usually did, even when I was just headed to class or coming home after making the ascent and descent four times already that day. On the first floor I tucked my electronic key into the pocket inside my shorts' waistband, pressed play on my shock-absorbing CD player, and took off across the parking lot, immediately hitting that comfortable stride. My stride. The natural shove-and-push I'd developed morning after morning in my senior year, half asleep with only the sad lyrics of the Counting Crows to guide me. If I ran, maybe I wouldn't be sad when I was older like him. If not, at least I knew I would have a song to turn to. A kin in un-understood melancholy.

Across the parking lot, I hit the chalk-white sidewalk between the disheveled greenhouse and the gate to the arboretum, which often went ignored by students though not by the staff that meticulously tagged plants and led tours when professors or public-school teachers asked. That was how I learned about it—an honors college tour. The bromeliads had taken me back to my father's yard with such force I'd expected to turn a corner and find the banana tree, green fruit hanging in protective clumps, hidden as the tree itself was in the back of Dad's "natural" area between our yard and the neighbor's.

On my morning runs, I usually bypassed the arboretum, though. I saved it for evenings just cooling down, when I was so sick of facing other people I needed the height of trees to extend my vision, to remind me that not every creature has two arms and two legs. That not everyone breathes the same air. That, if you block out the sound of cars making their ring around campus just a few feet away and ignore the squeak of your sneakers against wet leaves, there is such a thing as quiet.

That quiet sparked the morning runs around campus rather than in the arboretum. That, and the fear of disturbing something. Of an unsuspecting groundskeeper being startled by me. Of being told that I was not to run in such a sacred space.

Instead, I kept to the sidewalk, running through this canopy of trees and across the street along the edge of a parking garage, the sidewalks that in just a few sweet hours would teem with people.

To my left, bulldozers and other construction vehicles stood dormant, sleeping standing up, like horses. Later, jackhammers and drills would provide the white noise for learning that even electronic classrooms couldn't compete with. The look of progress. Before long, there would be another building, another landmark. Before long, if it weren't for this wobbly ring of sidewalk, I wouldn't even know my way.

I clomped through a dirt lot and hit a gravel extension to my sidewalk on the other side. Again, I cut through a stand of trees, and, young woman that I was, watched for sudden movements from inside the bushes.

Sometimes I met other runners there, as this point was near the other section of on-campus housing. Other girls in blue shorts, other girls fighting sleep and the freshman fifteen in

order to remind themselves that they were there for themselves, not to impress their roommates or parents or future boyfriends. At least this is what I told myself. That I wouldn't need a man if I felt good about me. The kind of logic fed by sitcoms. The kind of lie to myself that turned each step into a failure because once you believe in yourself, someone is supposed to see that. As soon as you don't need rescuing, that white knight is supposed to sweep you up. And so I ran away from rescue.

Through the trees, the gravel merged with chalky sidewalk again, depositing me next to the road. One day, my friend and I ran, and a car of guys passed us. I braced myself for some scathing remark and heard "You're hot!", no doubt a taunt. Without pause, Meredith shouted, "We know!", and when the car sped away, my laughter stopped me from running. We wore baggy shorts and T-shirts covered by too-big, long-sleeved shirts to keep the cool winter moisture away. Our wavy hair sputtered from our pony-tails. There was no way we were hot. Cute, perhaps. But not hot. Meredith shrugged. "What?" I shook my head and picked up my pace. Maybe we were. Hot.

Before long, the sidewalk led through the oldest section of on-campus housing, past a bike rack sporting too many flat tires and rusted handlebars. I hurried past the windows, insecure about my profile and form. Across another street, through three parking lots, and over to the fountain, which I looped. Later in the day, women would spread themselves out on the grass, legs bent in the air, shoulders bare to the sun. Men would edge in beside them. Some, like me, would sit on the cement benches with books open across their knees. And those books would become nothing but pretense, excuses for those activities I wouldn't admit were intoxicating: listening to the conversation the next bench over, for proof of connection between

strangers, even if I couldn't help feeling a little jealous that I wasn't the one picked for conversation; watching the passers-by and discerning their purpose on this campus at this hour; and, yes, losing sense of all of this, even the sun beating down on the bridge of my nose, for the hypnotic motion of the fountain showering white water into its chemical-blue basin. The water rose and fell, streams dividing and joining in their own programmed ballet against blue sky, puffs of clouds suggesting the afternoon downpour as a distant possibility. They were whispers against an ear. No words, all breath, sometimes the flick of a tongue.

This early, though, the fountain was silent. I paused my CD player, interrupting *Five For Fighting*. *Is it really this quiet?* If I were running later, I'd let my music drown out the sound of even the water doing its hydraulic calisthenics.

I crossed in front of the library and met the van unloading newspapers. Clockwork. If I missed them, I'd be behind. There was something immeasurably satisfying about being up when the newspapers were being loaded. Like I was ahead of the news.

From there, I looped around the student union's wooden paths among mangroves. I found my way back to the wide path by jogging between buildings, and got back to my dorm, where a few students removed bikes from bike racks and walked to class in miniscule cheerleader shorts. I wore a suit of humidity as if I'd picked up condensation the way a screen collects lint, sealing in my own sweat with Florida weather. The quiet blast of air conditioning made me shiver while I ran up the stairs.

Sometimes I ran back down and then back up and then back down and then back up, my heart racing with the thrill that I would miss a step and fly to the ground or hit the wall of steps ahead with my shins, ribs, and head. Once, a woman, likely a mother on a visit, opened a

stairwell door and asked if everything was all right. "Just me, running the stairs," I answered. "For exercise?" she asked, eyebrows raised. I smiled. She smiled back, shook her head. I took one more run up to the top, where I lived, and moved quietly, on my toes.

What could I say? We didn't have hills. And at the time our gym was nothing to speak of, a tiny extension off the dining hall. Other girls had worked out there, but I hadn't. In just a few months the recreation center would be complete, and young women would line up to brace themselves on metal bars and climb thousands of stairs nowhere while watching MTV. I would be one of them, taking my runs to the treadmill, which didn't require such an early wake-up or considerations for weather and the possibilities of abduction. There, I ran laps around the track until it got too crowded and until I grew dizzy watching intramural teams play basketball and volleyball beneath. I set the treadmill for six miles an hour, often taking the speed up and down, but never quite finding that perfect outdoor pace.

Without the quiet of the outdoor campus morning, I knew I wasn't the only one spending my time this way. I was surrounded by people doing the same exact thing in varying degrees of intensity, with varying degrees of end results. Many girls wore thick eyeliner and walked, the cords of their thongs peeking out of the low elastic of their tight pants. When a boy who had just discovered the width of his shoulders started up the machine next to one of them, she lost her workout in laughter. Me, I ran harder.

I'd lost my quiet. I needed people, but I needed more than to be surrounded by them—I needed them to notice me. If we didn't share a smile or at least a nod, it might as well be that neither of us were there, sharing a gym floor or sidewalk, breathing the same air. Not even a custom-made mix CD was enough to separate me from the others, encroaching, surrounding,



suffocating. With the flashing TV screens, the audio broadcasts of sporting events and MTV, the grunts of frat boys, heavy clanking of dropped weights, and the constant whir-slap of feet stamping the platforms of machines all around me, I turned my CD player up louder. To drown out the noise. To imagine myself back in quiet, in stillness, in morning peace.

### *Winter Park, 2006*

The back room of a humane society is not that different from the images of Chinese orphanages I've seen on TV—bars of cages like bars of cribs, paws extended like the tiniest of arms, faces offering views of faces tiled by bars. Some sleep, curled in the back corners, either oblivious to the danger facing them or impervious to it. If you don't need us, we don't need you, some seem to sneer, sullen teenagers in rooms without posters, rooms void of personality, waiting to be vacated and filled again.

Did I look for a child in Madeleine, my calico girl? Maybe. Or maybe a roommate to replace the one who'd moved away. She'd convinced me to visit the ASPCA that March day, to look. And then there was that brown head, pink nose, dot of black by the ear. Other cats snubbed me. Some wouldn't look. I didn't know how to get their attention, how to tell them I meant no harm, how to gauge personalities without sitting down to interviews and tea.

I didn't want the prettiest cat. That's not my personality. I've always played with dolls missing eyes, Barbies with missing legs, stuffed animals from garage sales. Those no one else would love. I thought it was my duty, even if that meant that after decades, somewhere deep in my cells, I feared those broken dolls truly were all I deserved.

And here was this delicate ten-month-old being lifted from the cage. She was placed in a cat play pen, full of cat toys. But she didn't play. She lay still, in the corner, purring under my

palm. Her eyes closed when my hand met the crown of her head, and she was softer than anything I'd ever touched before.

The woman who'd removed her from the cage said, "Sometimes they choose you."

Meredith talked to the cat, but I was too self-conscious to say much. Instead, I kept petting in the same placating rhythm, comforting me as much as her, if not more. I tried to think rational thoughts: How much does litter cost? Food? Visits to the vet? What about vacations, cat sitters, nights when I was late at school? But there were no answers, just the soft heat beneath my fingertips.

Children ran from cage to cage, sticking their fingers between bars, laying claim to this one and that one, making faces and shouting. "You don't want to scare the kitties," the woman said to them. And then there was a small hand touching the cat's belly. Her head jerked up, and my stomach tensed.

"Be gentle," I said. I'd stood there too long, doing nothing. Now these kids were going to scoop her up.

The woman came to my rescue, kneeling to the children, her voice simultaneously stern and soft: "This lady is getting to know her new cat," she said. "Find another one of your own." The kids clucked their tongues and moved on, sneakers squeaking against the cement floor.

Sometimes they choose you. She was returned to her pen, and I took her card to the front desk, signed a form, arranged to pick her up after she was spayed. Four days later, when she was confined to small spaces after surgery, I sat on the edge of the bathtub and read my poetry reading assignment out loud to her. She purred to the rhythm of Laura Kesische. The next night, she settled into the crook of my arm while I read in the chair that's hard to climb out of. She

rested her chin back and stuck out her chest. Trust that made my voice catch. Trust I'd love to feel myself, one day, outside of the arms of that chair.

*Beech Mountain, 1999*

Dad's school had an auction, where he bid on a time share on Beech Mountain, North Carolina, for spring break, the off-season. The mountain was green, the wires that would reel in skiers during whiter weather still. Instead of skiing, we hiked the mountain, keeping to boulders so we wouldn't get lost. We learned the footpaths that led to a clearing and housing development nearby; the house with tobacco brooms outside was also an antiques shop, and we were invited in to see the woman's collection of aprons and crockery—like our kitchen, only more kitschy. At the time, more themed.

A three-legged deer ran up to us, looking for tourists' snacks. In the rec building with eighties-era tiles running along the walls, the humidity of the heated pool wafted the warmth of home. On the second floor, Dad and I played ping-pong, and I had most of the heated pool to myself, in spite of from the other two families there.

In the mornings, while Mom and Dad's door was still closed, I took off to the woods' footpaths. In those days, I rose before them. I found freedom in the mornings, solace in the sound of my footfalls against dirt. The deer greeted me, and I headed into the woods, passing the familiar trees with gaping knotholes, swerving around nets of spider webs glistening with morning dew. Wet grass itched my ankles, and the damp air weighed down my T-shirt. But I let my thoughts go, tried not to imagine someone behind a tree, watching, waiting. Too many paranoid thoughts substantiated by reports on the evening news.

I reached the clearing. I was fifteen years old, but thoughts of the pioneer girl novels I'd loved as a little girl rushed to mind—legs free and feminine beneath calico skirts like the one my mom made for me for Halloween when I was ten, a sea of prairie grass all around, except where the tips scratched blue sky. Room to run and breathe and spin. I looked around me, saw no one but the morning mist, and spun. I raised my arms as propellers and spun, faster and faster and faster and faster, trying to spot myself by looking at the houses and then at the trees, but then they all blurred together with the fog, and I was free, free, sick and dizzy and fifteen-going-on-five and free. I fell into the grass and closed my eyes. When I opened them, a wall of white met me, a cloud saying hello. I turned—no houses. I turned again—the green tip of a tree met my vision. And then the spinning stopped suddenly while my heart jumped a beat—I was swabbed by cotton. This cloud was going to pick me up and carry me away. I was going to be stuck here, blind, while a clear-seeing bear barreled its way toward me or some mountain man whisked me off to his shanty. I felt seen from all angles while I could see nothing. I was breathless, but I only had one option—to run. To outrun the fog.

I headed toward the hint of green, squinting all the way. I didn't see bark until I was up close, and I hesitated before entering the path—worse than getting stuck in the clearing while I waited for the cloud to pass would be getting stuck in the woods, between trees scarier than those from *The Wizard of Oz*. A split-second decision. Ahead, it looked more clear. All I had to do was run. But delicately, on the moist leaves. Delicately, so as not to disturb something, so as not to bring on anger.

It worked. I hurtled the fog as it surrounded my ankles. My heart beat in my ears. I remembered a story from Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods* about a man who'd mistaken a

tree for a bear and even almost shot at it. Suddenly, trees became bears. Trees became men, arms up, posing as trees. Even though it was spring and there was an overhang of leaves, most branches were still brittle. The woods were a single gray streak, with leaves blurring into branches blurring into hints of sky. As I ran, sweat and the jarring motion blurred my eyes, too. With the fog, the world, along with the extra moisture beading across my shoulders, became one big blur, and somehow I was smeared up in it.

I ran into the very spider webs I'd dodged before, clawing their stickiness from my cheeks and spitting the strings off my tongues while I silently apologized to the spiders. I was a suburb girl, accustomed to jogging the shoulder of a street marked fifteen-miles-per-hour though drivers rarely took the curves at such low speed. I was not made to deal with fog or chiggers burrowing beneath my socks or moss in my hair.

When I reached the end of the path, sweat stung my eyes. Might have been tears—the sensation was the same as running on the beach, when the salt stings the skin and rain beats down offering more relief than tears ever could on their own. I was there, and so was the three-legged deer.

I walked back to the suite my parents and I shared, wiping my eyes, sniffing my breaths, looking back at the edge of the woods growing dimmer and dimmer with distance. I'd found my way in, but what about the way out?

### *Summer Trip, 1993*

For this three-week vacation, I was equipped with "outfits": comfortable plaid shorts with a matching blue cotton tank, flowered shorts with a red-orange shirt, white cotton skirt with small black polka dots coupled with a cotton tank in the reverse pattern—black with white dots.

I had a pair of plaid tennis shoes, a pair of white. I felt set. I would match, and in pictures I would not look “like a ragamuffin,” as my mother often said when I dressed myself. All of this considered, I would be as comfortable as one can be spending days in unfamiliar airports and sharing the stink of others on planes and facing the looks of relatives and unfamiliar cousins a whole side of the country away.

My mom had an aunt living in northern California, and we ventured with her to San Francisco, land of wind. I wore an old navy-blue sweater knit with small fruit images where knit diamonds met on the chest. The sleeves were so long they nearly reached my fingertips. It was an old lady sweater, really, but it had been a hand-down or gift from my sister Sara, and it was comfortable and not like what everyone else wore, so I wore it. In pictures, I hug my arms to my chest against the wind. I got windburn when we ventured onto the Golden Gate Bridge, the wind as much a result of the weather as the effect of the fast cars that passed.

On Pier 39, street performers lift a blonde girl, my age, on stage by one leg and a fistful of hair. I smile, wide-eyed, thinking they must know what they are doing so as not to hurt the girl. Or that perhaps the girl is part of the act. But once on stage, she's crying, reaching out for her mother, shocked and angry below the stage, and I want to look away, but I can't.

The girl takes part in the act at the men's insistence. They balance unicycles and such on their noses and use big arm gestures to encourage a smile from the girl, but she just sniffs back tears, and, at the end, one of the performers tips her from the stage and into her mother's arms. As the crowd disperses, her mother yells and yells and yells at the performers, and I rub the back of my head.

In Monterey, we watch otters float on their backs and scrub themselves. One cracks a clamshell on his chest. Mothers strip small children down to nothing and let them play where the tin-colored water meets the brown sand.

We find a place that I think must be a secret, a behind-the-scenes warehouse for the sets of mountains and valleys visible from the road. Here, the ground and walls alike are made of rocks the color of light brown sugar, and small, smooth stones tile the ground, up to where the water gobbles them up, washes them over, spits them out. I pocket a couple of perfect ones, though they are all perfect. One is grey with smooth, white dots—something of a heavy speckled egg. Smoother than anything I'd ever felt come out of the water.

This place was quiet but for the waves. The gray sky hung heavy above us. Stones squealed against each other beneath our feet in tiny fingernail-chalkboard shrieks. But I didn't cringe. I didn't feel this sound in my teeth. I wanted my plaid shoes to sink in, to feel the cold stones against my ankles. In the distance sea lions barked. I squinted for whales, hoping to glimpse a seafoam humpback tail, like that of the whale I'd adopted that year. How big would a whale look in this cove? In the entire expanse of Pacific Ocean? I have little sense of space in perspective. I have to touch, to feel, to hear to understand.

On our way to the redwood forest, famous to me for the song we sang in a kindergarten play, "This Land is Your Land," Mom clawed the car's plush armrest. Aunt Dinky closed her eyes next to me in the back seat, and I looked cautiously out the window, down the cliff. I didn't want to lean, didn't want to make the car tip. Mom and Dad weren't comfortable with driving the mountain ridges, and Dad worried about the possibility of careening Mack trucks, which we wouldn't see until they were right on top of us.

And then Dad pulled over to the shoulder, at a smooth place where there were trees below. Sick to our stomachs, we needed a break. Dad climbed down the grassy slope, and I worried he'd lose his balance and fall. He called me over, pointed to the bushes. "See this? What are these?" He held a handful of dark berries out to me. "Blackberries? Raspberries, before they turn red?" He handed the berries to me, soft and thinner than plastic in my hand. The bumps hid tiny hairs, and then those bumps exploded on my tongue—sweet, dark, not tart like the Florida fruit I was used to. Tiny seeds lodged themselves in the crevices between my teeth. This was better than any fruit snack, any rubbery concoction a factory could produce.

I trusted my dad. If I'd spotted the fruits myself, I wouldn't have eaten them—they could have been poison in disguise. Back in the car, sweet juice tickled my throat.

Illinois, and my grandparents' house brought the familiar smells that I associated with their linoleum floors, yellow-flowered wallpaper, glass cases of cordials, echoing basement, and hot sunroom. These are the scents I now know to be mildew, dust, mold. They weren't dirty people, but the house was old. Ice cream Drumsticks could always be found in the freezer; tart, stringy rhubarb in the garden; tire swings and the wooden plank swing always hanging from the tree that housed the squirrels, waiting for me. Air colder and more refreshing than I'd ever breathe in Florida would always be there to stream through my hair and cool my lungs, even when I got older, heavier, and the branch above bent with my weight.

In Chicago, we met my cousin and her husband for lunch at the top of the Hancock building. Malora, Jim, and their baby girl, Andrea, embodied my unspoken ideals of yuppie perfection: they were young adults, they knew the city but lived outside of it, he took the train to



work, they had the money for business lunches. He was a good-looking man who wore a suit to work and had that friendly rhythm of speech—full of politeness and appropriately timed jokes—that made people smile. Young Andrea and I bonded right away. She smiled, and her soft cheeks dimpled. My legs were growing too long for my body. My bangs were getting frizzy, so I hid them beneath headbands. Babies with their blue eyelids were perfect.

The city was brighter than San Francisco, full of stone. Lake Michigan was a brighter green than a swimming pool, and no matter how long my parents tried to convince me, I would not believe it was not chlorinated.

We all drove up to Wisconsin, where my dad's brother and wife were vacationing, and I was sick of cars. I was sick of sharing small spaces. I was sick of travel. I listened to the adults laugh, and my stomach was still stuck on a cliff in California, making the mistake of looking down.

Baby Andrea slept through the afternoon. I watched the water, imagined living in this cabin with the tiny bedrooms and grimy tile, imagined being young and happy with such a young child. I was there in body, but thinking of a possible future. Thinking in fiction.

We rented a motel room not far away, and the room was big and wide, equipped with tables for conferences. We invited everyone over, ate a banquet of fried chicken and sides on those tables, and I followed the baby around.

That night, my parents and I watched the gymnastics portion of the Olympics from our adjacent queen-sized beds. Shannon Miller was the favorite, but I liked Kim Zmeskal, the underdog, the best. I held my breath while she flipped from one corner of the mat to the other,

and, in the dark, I couldn't help myself—I did a round-off landing in a straddle on the conference-motel-room floor, and Dad told me to go to bed before I disturbed the neighbors.

Mom kept checking the locks because we'd seen bullet holes in one of the doors. I stared at the red light of the smoke detector, thinking alternately of break-ins with ski-masked-men and Olympic flips before I finally fell asleep. My stomach hurt. Even though my parents were right there, I was sick for home, for my room where I could leave the light on as late as I wanted. For a room where I knew the shadows, where Mom and Dad knew how to drive.

Back home, we got ready for school. I tried on new clothes acquired in Chicago and the summer-trip clothes alike, and I immediately retired the blue tank I'd felt so right in. In the mirror, I was surprised to see my breasts—breasts?—poking up against the tight material. Mom insisted I was too young for even a training bra, so the tank hung quietly in the back of the closet while I found baggier, less flattering clothes to wear, to hold on to my dimples and the back seat and stomach aches and blackberries just a little bit longer.

### *Sarasota: Summer, 1993*

My favorite month is December for purely selfish reasons—my birthday, Christmas, lovely movies with happy endings, vacations, cool weather. But of the remaining eleven hot months, my favorites are actually the hottest, in the heat of summer, when bloated blue clouds disrupt the party held behind the library to celebrate the end of the summer reading program. The air-conditioned trailer-sized branch of the library offered a cool respite from the heat of the car and the blistering jog across the parking lot. The plastic covers of novels were cold against my inner arm, and I stockpiled stacks of Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary, and Laura Ingalls Wilder,

adding stamps to my summer reading log every time I went. With Judy Blume's characters, I entered summer worlds I don't quite understand—worlds of public pools where girls had to wear bathing caps, where girls bet to see who would get their periods first, and where friendships were torn up over race differences.

The summers of the '60's and '70's now seem idealized in books and movies in which neighborhood kids play together in sepia-toned nostalgia the same hue as baseball-diamond clay. No one cares how they look, except the older ones, the near-teens—everyone is more concerned with being comfortable, with asserting themselves through play. In the new millennium, it's no secret that we're scared and that, at least on surface levels, our priorities have changed from winning games to looking the best while doing so. Play is organized through camps, through play-groups, through YMCAs and background checks. Even as a child, I used the neighborhood fun of the books I read and the stories my father told as impetus for my own neighborhood fun. For that, and for the safety of my cul-de-sac, I was very, very lucky.

I got jealous when Dad described his childhood, how Uncle Tom once crawled from one end of the suburb to the other, following the white line on the road. How they went fishing with neighborhood boys, how they played football in grass fields. I was jealous of friends who lived in the neighborhoods near the elementary school—neighborhoods full of PTA moms and future student government reps. However, I did have the family next door and Allison, who lived down around the corner with her grandparents. If it weren't for them, I would have been quite lonely.

Next door lived a Mennonite family of six, with two more children to be added when I was in high school. The oldest child was three years younger than me, but for the most part this age difference didn't matter; we could still play kick-the-can and turn flips on the bar between

trees in their back yard and play sharks-and-minnows in their pool. If I saw them splashing around, I hung quietly in the yards between ours, picking at blades of grass until they called out to me. Mom had cautioned me not to invite myself over, but to let them have family time. So instead I made myself available to be asked. And I loved it over there, even though some things they did were very different—school was held in their dining room, and they prayed out loud before meals. I genuinely liked them. Sometimes I felt like a too-secular presence, repeating comebacks I'd heard at school and not known might be offensive. But then we played basketball and rode our bikes around the circle, and differences evaporated in the sweat on our backs.

### *Florida Weather I*

My favorite times, though, were the 3:00 August showers. The world would get still, even the cicadas quiet, while the greens in the grass and leaves willed themselves into warning shades. Dad sat in a wooden chair on the lanai, Mom lay down on the couch for a nap, and I sat on the wooden swing on the front porch with a pad of paper and a book. Once the rain hit hard, though, I stopped reading. I didn't write. I spoke softly to the noise of rain hitting leaves, the rocks that lined the walkway, splashing off the vines of bleeding heart that spiraled the porch rails. Waterfalls spouted from the two eaves, so loud the noise drowned out the creaking of the screen. Earthworms appeared at the mouth of the porch, and I kept my eyes open for snakes. Mostly, though, I just moved back and forth, letting the coolness hit my face and arms, looking into the mist for animals, watching the colors change, and listening.

Dad did this, too. When the rain got too hard or lightning came out, I moved to the back porch with him. I used to ask what he thought about when he looked out, and he just said he was watching the rain. When I stopped sulking because the lightning knocked out the cable or made

the alarm system sound, I started watching the rain, too. Listening to it. Really, watching and listening to nothing. Just letting my mind go, whatever that meant, until the birds had come back out and the sun had heated up the soupy air with a vengeance and mosquitoes flew low to breed in puddles. I retreated to the house, to TV or a book, to a dinner being cooked—the microwave beeping, dishwasher being unloaded. Sometimes I took this time to plunk out a piano exercise, but somehow the quiet seemed too sacred, even for music.

Since I've left home, I've spent at least three summers there, finding that seat on the swing or lanai. I've ridden out hurricanes there, watching the wind knot whips of Spanish moss around the branches of oaks. During those storms, belongings were lashed to the lanai pool table with ropes. Dad did that. You prepare, and then you watch. Once, we boarded the windows of bedrooms, and the normally bright house became a cave. Like home, but not.

I'm spending this summer away, at my Winter Park apartment, and when the rain comes, I miss that front porch. Sometimes I open my ground-floor porch sliding-glass door to let the rain-air in. I have a smaller porch, so it's hard to sit out there without getting wet. But, as long as I'm home, rain is a welcome relief. Rain does for the world what a good cry does for the soul. Cleans it out, rinses the pollen off the cars. Offers respite from the heat. If it's going to be humid anyway, it might as well be a cooler, fresher humidity.

I watch the rain, safe in my room. Let my mind wander as during a run. Let my thoughts speak against the background of waterfalls flying from eaves. And, with a deep pain in my ribs, I miss my family.

## *Running, 1995*

I wasn't skinny and I wasn't fat. I had frizzy hair and pimples. I was sincere to people. Shy except when provoked to hyperness by compliments. In short, I didn't have much to lose. So, when the sixth-grade class was asked to once again run laps around a line of cars in the middle-school parking lot, I ran. We'd done this before, but it hadn't meant anything. This time, it was for a fit test and some sort of incentive—the top few girls in these two classes would race against the other top girls in sixth grade. I'd stopped playing soccer the year before—even the recreational sport was getting too competitive for my increasingly awkward legs and easily hurt feelings. I wasn't in fantastic shape. But I ran.

As we lined up, one girl said, "I'm on my period. I'm not doing much." Maybe that's what did it—a reaction to that openness. A reaction to confident people who would talk about such things with class members. I don't know. But I do know that when I was handed a straw, I smiled inside. Picked up my pace. Only those in the first ten places got straws. Received another straw the next time around. As long as I kept receiving straws, I wouldn't be humiliated.

I don't remember much about the other runners—there was the typical walking group, those who jogged and tried not to show the amount of effort they put forth to do so, those who were used to running from the soccer practices they'd attended since age five. I picked one of these girls, who must have been in first or second place, and decided that as long as she didn't lap me, I'd be all right.

While I had put up effort in P.E. before, I'd been too self-conscious to want to show I'd cared what others' thought. But for some reason, that day, when I was handed straws, I ran harder and faster. My knees and thighs hurt after the fourth or fifth lap. My chest burned. I

willed myself to make it around the next bend and bargained that once I got there, I could walk until I got to the red car. I did this. Picking up my heavy legs again was the hardest thing I'd done yet. But I did it. I couldn't be lapped.

Sweat stung my eyes, and I made the stinging mistake of using the back of my sweating arm to wipe them. I felt my body crumpling from the inside out, but my feet kept slapping the pavement. I was still going. If my body was giving up, my feet didn't know it. I passed the walkers, the girls who didn't try, and a little adrenaline jumped within me. Another straw. A look into my gym teacher's face—can I really do this? And she was excited, jumping up and down, screaming, "Don't stop, don't stop, you can do it!" And so I didn't stop. In the last stretch, I ran harder, faster, so fast I couldn't feel my legs, couldn't even hear my feet unless I strained, and even then I wondered how the sound was so detached from the quadriceps, knees, and calves that were supposed to cause each step. I feared I'd go sprawling across the pavement. In the end, I was fifth. 8:32. I was sore for days.

A couple weeks later came the race for all the sixth grade girls. My friend Carlie said that she was going to try to keep up with whoever was fastest and see what happened. I thought I'd try to keep up with Carlie. But then with the whistle off everyone went, starting the four-lap journey around the perimeter of the big grass field where I used to go to soccer practice, and it was so big and most of these other girls so strong and light and tall that I gave up as soon as I started, embarrassed to be there and proud to try at the same time. I wanted to try harder, but I didn't want to fail. So I ran and it hurt and the grass scratched my ankles and Carlie stayed in second or third. The girl who won was a school-famous soccer star, a very popular girl upholding the reputations of her older, popular brothers. By the time I got to the locker room,

red-faced and sweaty from what effort I'd put forth so as not to completely embarrass myself, the winner was puking in the bathroom. She'd run so hard in the 3:30 heat she'd gotten sick. There was the living definition of determination.

While I entertained thoughts of going out for track in high school, I was always too scared of making a fool of myself and failing. I ran on my own, in secret to everyone except my family. I lifted weights and did crunches in my bedroom. I went to yoga classes with my mom. As a sophomore in college, I returned home for my first 5K run with my sister Ruth. We were running at Oscar Shearer State Park for the scrub-jays. We took off on that thirty-degree morning, me in way too many layers but not knowing better. I tried to pass girls in my age group. I didn't know the route. I didn't know how long that third mile would feel. When someone I'd passed and been passed by several times passed me again, whipping up her speed to something uncatchable, I nearly gave up and walked. I had no idea how much was ahead. But as more runners picked up their speed and passed, I reasoned that the end must be close. At the foot of a wooden bridge, I smelled hamburgers, a scent normally welcome, but that then, at 8:00 a.m. at the end of a race, I found sickening. I saw people, heard cheers, saw my mom clapping her gloved hands as I passed. And at the end, I nearly puked, myself. So I knew I'd done my best.

I came in third in my age group. I came back for runs on the beach after that. Finally, at a college 5K later that year, on what I called my triathlon day (twenty-minute morning swim, afternoon Spinning class, evening 5K), I took first in my age group. Again, at the end, I'd been passed by a woman I'd passed a mile before. Turns out, she was in the group above me. The ends of runs are the toughest for me. I lose my faith that they are going to end.



I don't know if I'll ever run like that again. I wasn't excellent—I'd never make the college cross-country team, I don't think, and coming in first in an age group isn't a testament to how many people are in that age group competing. But that doesn't mean it doesn't feel good, that it doesn't keep that little torch of victory struck in that sixth-grade race burning.

These days, my knee hurts. I'm a bit heavier than I was in the 5K days. But I'm trying. I'd love to do a triathlon—to prove to myself that I am in that shape. We'll see. I'll try. I need to finish proving whatever it was I'd challenged myself to do on that sixth grade day. I don't quite know what that is or how to do it. But I think it's possible. If I didn't, I would have quit running long ago. I hear my feet long after I've stopped feeling my legs.

### *Florida Weather II*

Weather is often described as having the attentions of a lover: wind caresses shoulders, water licks sand, summer heat breathes hot air onto the backs of our necks. Humidity covers us in blankets. We perspire. Lovers leave each other for the beckoning maids of other cities and memories labeled "home."

I don't call Sarasota home anymore, even though I grew up there. I recognize it as the place I learned to walk, the place where my parents and siblings have almost always lived. Perhaps I will call it home years from now, when I am far from Florida altogether and can take nothing for granted—not the water, not the year-round warmth, not the proximity to my family. For now, though, "Sarasota" encapsulates all my memories of this city, as does "Bradenton" for its neighboring town, where I went to school and played with Girl Scout friends and worked as a camp counselor when I returned for summers from college. My brightest summer memories are from Sarasota, where I was safe. Where I was kept company even when college dorms had been

abandoned, even that one year I decided to go it alone in Orlando and found myself only occupying spaces others had left behind. That was the loneliest, hottest, most suffocating summer of my life.

And here I am. A summer on my own, but with a job. With family close by. And now it is raining. The comfort of rain: an excuse not to go to the grocery store. An excuse to read. An excuse to open the blinds (who's out there to see in?), and an excuse to stare.

My father's knuckles swell when it rains. He doesn't like to talk about it, but when rain is eminent, he doesn't open difficult packages of food. He lets his wrists cross, almost touching, and hang between his knees when he sits. Sometimes he rubs his fingers and wrists absentmindedly as his mother used to do.

Tonight, the rain drills into my shoulders, though I am indoors. I feel every drop in the curve of my spine, the top of the question mark where shoulder muscles, neck muscles, and middle-back muscles meet. My delicate rhomboid, the tiny muscle of the rotator cuff just to the left of my spine has borne the strain of book-filled backpacks, shoulder bags bursting with notebooks, and purses filled with iPod, plastic, and coinage, for years. It has borne the scissored motion of my arms, pumping while running, my windmills of doing laps of the crawl in the pool, and has been the axis of force between the resistance my lower body faces and all the release my upper body can provide on a stationary bike. This little pillow mint of a muscle is my shock absorber. And it's growing exhausted. It's tired of being ignored. And so now it lets the rain speak through it, even as I lie on a bag of crushed ice on the living room floor. Tell me where it hurts. Someone, kiss the pain away.

What if this is how a city rejects you? Not through the people, but through pain? What if you run, but the next city's snow does the same—screams through your shoulder, no matter how much you ice and rest. And what if you come to find that it's not just the city, but the body turning a whisper into a shout into a shove against a wall? What then? Do you apologize? Cry? Fight with fists and nails?

Or go home, wrapping yourself in the memory of the new bed that sat an entire summer waiting for you in your new apartment while you rested tired, twenty-year-old bones in the crevices of tough, foam bus seats and lumpy mattresses that barely hid the slats underneath on your dream trip to Italy and Switzerland.

I had fun that summer. Honestly, until the pain started up again, I'd forgotten about this. Homesickness drilled a hole between two ribs, that's how I imagined it. I tried to align my bones with bed frames—wrists to rails, hips to crossbeams. I longed for a bed I'd never lain in, besides the five-minute demo in a dimly lit department store. A thick mattress, box spring underneath. Firm, with a pillow-top covering—the first mattress for my body. For my back. My sleep. For me.

So what will it take for me to stretch regularly, to remember to take anti-inflammatories, to take it easy? Can the body reconcile? I'd like to think so.

Something here is inevitable, a liaison as dangerous to enter as love in your twenties, before you're settled somewhere, when a slim set of skills and a big need for money fling you wherever the jobs call. It's the sad inevitability of the conflict viced on happiness. As inevitable as the growth of a kitten—five pounds to twelve in a year. As natural as the surf sucks up the sand, rolling it into its cheeks and depositing it somewhere secret. For preservation of what will,

too, one day erode. And become another island. For a place to tap into memory. Oh yes, that sand. Running through my fingers, bright coquinas sucking at my nails. An imprint of my bottom left behind when the water finally toppled me forward.

Will the body break up with me? I don't think so. Is this a question of global warming, of my guilt over not taking a stand against the fact that my apartment complex doesn't support much recycling? Hey, I have a place to live, and we do what we can. Let those muscles work in concert. Wave to the waves. And breathe deep. Breathe through the pain, into the memory of that muscle before you knew its name.

### *Sweating, 2007*

I used to run because I could. I thought about the students' in my parents' classes, some of whom were confined to wheelchairs, others who didn't have the capacity to understand the stakes of a race, others who could only race, who ran because they were cheered for. I channeled those kids and I thought about the ones who would never know the power of this freedom, so simple. I could run. I could run, and my baby sister would never have the chance. Much as I sweated, much as my legs hurt, far away as my house seemed to scooch with every step I took closer, I could run.

The only thoughts that stopped me short were of hatred. They were intended to be motivational: do this because you watch too much TV, do this because you have bad acne, do this because you rain sweat, even when not running. Do this because you are ugly. In the end, they stopped me. I was a string toy hanging limp on my cord. Thoughts of those less fortunate couldn't pull me from this. Only thoughts of satisfaction at the end. Of the freedom and fear,

the thrill of losing my legs at the knees in the last few steps. Of knowing I wasn't ugly, not when I ran, and that I deserved to know in the end that I'd done my best.

When I moved to college and various other places, I thought I would always keep my legs, my muscles, my stride. I had my eyes through which to take in unfamiliar sights, my memories to familiarize them against. When people left me but I stayed put, I still had myself, my proof that they weren't taking me with them. That there was something left behind, on a treadmill, making the numbers go up, or on the road, making trees pass with one step at a time. There was a part of me left behind, and it was tearing into my sides. Making me thirst so much I squeezed that water bottle hard. I could never drink enough water, and I filled glass after glass after glass of it directly from faucet to throat until I finally fell asleep, my brain's activity finally overcome by the physiological needs met by physical exhaustion.

Same with Spinning, same with yoga. I thought they reaffirmed some belief in myself, inside and out, but then instructors would shuffle or my schedule would change or (gasp) I'd try someone new, and I'd hate it. Feel like I couldn't do it myself. *Why don't you tell me how long is left?* I'd think. *We aren't supposed to sprint longer than forty-five seconds, and it's been two minutes!* In my self-defense, I turned self-denial into instructor-contempt, even if at the same time I feared I was wrong, that this was another thing I only pretended to know a lot about. And then I'd feel the anger in my hamstrings. And under that, some sort of pride. A home in the tautness of sinew. A home framed by handlebars and a fixed wheel. And this song, this beat, hammering tendon to joint, testing fissures between cartilage and bone. The memory of flight.

A smile when I *knew* that I was going to make it to the finish line, no matter where the instructor set it. I'd make it to my finish line.

And sometimes I wonder if the exhaustion afterward is worth it. I may be surrounded in a cycling class, but afterward I go home alone. I may go out with friends, but I may choose to stay home, spent. Is this worth the freedom of the road? In order to keep training, you have to believe it is. But that road is just a road. And nine times out of ten, I'm riding it alone.

## Near Drowning

Muscles remember everything. Two summers ago, I rode my bike the mile to the nearest YMCA several times a week to swim off bad dates. Before the dates, I tried to swim off my anxiety, but, while leaving me relaxed, the swims also left me so exhausted and light-headed that I felt drunk before my first drink. As I looked over my salad and into a man's eyes, getting distracted by his gestures or the conversation at the table behind us, I wished we were in lanes next to each other, swimming, sharing endorphin intoxication instead of conversation in crowded rooms with the background buzz of cheap alcohol and the thrumming of amps while bands set up behind us. I only wish I could have swum off the dates as I went on them. I would have loved to leave a date feeling healthy. Instead, I returned to that chemical bath after every date, working my worried thoughts into forward strokes and flutter kicks.

This pre- and post-date swimming led me to enter my first sprint triathlon. I am twenty-four years old, and a triathlon has been nothing more than a daydream for years, something to get me through the laps, but now I've researched dates and charged fifty dollars to my credit card to hold my place on October 27. I've been swimming for two years in anticipation of one day taking a breath deep enough to swim through water without a wall just twenty-five yards away. To call myself an athlete, something I've wanted to do ever since I chickened out of track in high school and instead ran on my own in the morning darkness when no one could see. I could be satisfied with the endorphin rush of everyday exercise, but putting miles behind me, leaving tire tracks and footprints, has a certain appeal that steel gym equipment just can't replace.

Muscles remember. In the same pool where I swim, babies scream when they surface from Safe Start lessons, tearing me from my date-night reveries. Children sit on the edge, legs dangling, waiting to take a turn with a swimming instructor. I try to bury my head beneath the water, but it doesn't drown out the crying. When I was five, I could have learned the easy way. Instead, my fears only compounded from that very first lesson at a day camp run by a lifeguard named Mildred. Later, *The Little Mermaid's* gigantic, squid-inspired Ursula would be the closest likeness to her I'd ever find. With that crying in the background, every splash from the man in the neighboring lane, every flick of my own ankle, every forward reach into white, churning pool water takes me back to Camp McIntosh.

After a morning of playing circle games beneath trees, I loved the way the cold, blue water felt on my red skin. I loved my ponytailed instructor's fingers, cold and rubbery around my wrists. I even loved the smell of chlorine and the slimy feeling of my wet hair against my cheeks and the fresh feeling of changing back into my red shorts and T-shirt after the swim. I dozed in Mom's car on the way home from camp every day with a sense of accomplishment, even at that young age.

What I didn't love was the depth of the water. Anything could have been under there, below our dangling feet, waiting for us to go under—alligators, killer whales I dreamed of meeting in pools and the ocean, nurses with long needles. I didn't love the way I'd only bob halfway out of the water, with all of the splashing going on around me from other kicking legs, and I'd take in a mouthful of water that burned my throat and chest and stung as the vapors came back out my nose. That choking feeling, that moment when I was blinded by tears of pain and fear stuck with me, even after I'd been stabilized by my instructor. This fear wasn't enough to



keep me out of the pool, but it was enough to make me hold my instructor close and protest when she insisted on holding just my fingertips while I stretched back and kicked. Everything was bigger than me, and when I was submerged in that big rectangle of bluer-than-blue water, that fact was more apparent than ever.

When she dropped my hands and told me to swim to her, I dug through the water while my chin bobbed and water slipped through my lips and onto my tongue. All of this, plus my instructor's super-enthusiastic smile, pulled me through the water toward her: if she thought I could do this, and it was only a little way, then maybe I could. But then she moved back. With each stroke closer, she stepped further away. And, when I finally reached her, shaking in her arms, pinching her slippery flesh with all my fingernails, I was done.

That afternoon, in the car, I told Mom I didn't want to swim anymore. "They step back," I said, sure she wouldn't catch the gravity of the situation. *She stepped back, and she didn't tell me she would. I can't trust the person who's supposed to save me if I drown.* All the other kids were doing it. Everyone had to learn how to swim.

She surprised me, though. She looked right at me. "No one can ever make you do anything you don't want to do."

These words came out of my mother's mouth and settled in the base of my spine. Her forehead creased. They meant more than I wanted them to. They meant suggested situations I should fear, situations full of instinct but without image at the time. They suggested responsibility I wasn't sure I wanted to assume.

My mother had lost a baby just over a year before. The baby, Megan, had never taken one breath. Had never known a waterless life. Mom was vigilant, I'm sure, extra protective

about me, though, in Florida, with the pools and the Gulf, most parents take the precaution of making sure their kids can swim. I wasn't thinking of Megan back then, of what my mother must have gone through when every day she dropped me off with strangers to jump in a pool and fling my arms. Perhaps, along with teaching me something about caution, she was teaching me something even more important, without either of us realizing it: how and when to give in to fear.

In the end, I'd cried on the side of the pool while Mildred yelled, "Your parents paid for this!" The other kids jumped in and swam. When they got close to their instructors, the instructors stepped back. Mine did not comfort me. The sun burned outlines of my bathing suit's criss-crosses into my back while I cried on the deck.

Mom's words as we drove home from Camp McIntosh washed back to me over the summer of swimming off dates. *No one can make you do anything you don't want to do.* Sweating in my sweater and jeans two years ago, I'd cried beneath a boy on a couch. I'd sunk into the crack between cushions and lost my breath, his face over me, his jeans hot against mine. He didn't notice my tears, the fact that I'd let go of him. Thoughts came in slow motion, and I paddled around and around them, retroactively watching lost moments until I finally aligned the past and future just long enough to punch through and up for air, off the couch, into my flip-flops. I had to get out. Get down the stairs without falling. Get home, one traffic light at a time.

I got lost in a twisted neighborhood after taking a wrong turn. My mind was still on the couch, my breath caught in the bubbles of champagne I shouldn't have drunk. Locked in a bottle, now empty, down my throat. I'd thought I wanted that. But when a sweaty make-out

session pressed down on me with the weight of this stranger and the memory of my ex, I didn't want it anymore. Not this kiss. Not this guy. Not this night. Maybe not ever.

*No one can make you do anything you don't want to.* I hadn't wanted to humiliate myself, either. But I did. Later that summer, I was passed from one guy's side to another's at a party. I didn't want that second boy's attention, but I kissed him anyway. When someone remarked that we were going to have sex on the hallway floor, I laughed out loud in that poor boy's face. I wasn't going to do anything I didn't want to do, but I stepped dangerously close to the edge of the pool.

Before I signed up for that triathlon, though, back in that summer, the immediate purpose of each swim was much more practical than even training for an event. In July and August, I swam off bad dates. I swam off anxiety before dates, which may have been counterproductive because, while the swim left me relaxed, my state of exhaustion and chemical intoxication left me lightheaded, drunk before my first drink. I only wish I could have swum off the dates as I went on them. I would have loved to share that endorphin intoxication much more than the buzz of cheap alcohol or the thrumming ears of local concerts. I would have loved to leave a date feeling healthy. Instead, I returned to that chemical bath after every date, working my worried thoughts into forward strokes and flutter kicks.

After all the swims of pre-date anticipation, during which I debated what I wanted and what, in the end, possibly too late, I did not, I swam through post-date euphoria after I finally, fatefully met the man who gave me hope for a real relationship. I swam through the cluster of electronic impulses of anxiety that followed, mixing memory with worry—did I kiss him too soon? Does he really like me? How does my waist feel to his fingers, and if I skip a swim for

another date, will he feel the difference?—everything was precarious, everything a balance between undefined forces. I'd met someone I liked, someone smart and who didn't need a four-drink minimum to kiss me; someone I didn't need four drinks to kiss. This man recommended books and knew what a hybrid bike was. The night we met, he and I talked for hours on a coffee shop couch after a friend's acoustic show and then joined my friends for Denny's at 1:00 a.m. The next day, I returned to this pool, exhausted from a night of conversation and laughing and dining and coffee and thinking of the Denny's business card pinned beneath the lamp on my sideboard, his email address and phone number on the back. For months afterward, I returned to that fateful coffee shop to do homework, and I often stared over my laptop to the sagging loveseat where we'd talked. After a big, sweet latte, my veins pounded with my pulse, and I returned to the pool for equilibrium. Pulse to movement, body to water, sinking to surfacing, past to future, intention to result, him to me, interest to love to all the possible breaks, and too many unknowns in between all of these ends. The water above and beneath the body, before and behind, drove forward every stroke.

When I enter the water a year after meeting Wes, I taste almond lattes. We don't share this gym, but the right lane still reminds me of him.

After Camp McIntosh I must have taken some successful swimming lessons because, while my technique wasn't anywhere near perfect (and still isn't), I spent plenty of time wading in the Gulf and playing games in friends' pools. When I was seven years old, my friend Allison's grandmother's pool was the center of my summer life. I hopped on my bike and rode the half-mile through the neighborhood to Allison's grandmother's house nearly every hot day,

much as I do now when I go to the Y, and after we'd spent the day splashing and then making Barbie towns out of wicker furniture and eating grilled cheese sandwiches with Cherry Coke in mesh peach-colored chairs while the usual late-afternoon rain poured into the pool, I rode my bike home again, at once completely exhausted and thoroughly refreshed. While my eyes stung with the residue of chlorine, I stood in front of the pantry until the bright orange bag of Cheetos revealed itself to me, and at the counter I ate and ate and ate until my hands were furry with orange flakes and Mom warned me I'd turn into a Cheeto if I didn't stop.

Allison's parents had just gone through a divorce, so she and her mother lived with her mother's mother, whom we called Gran. As a seven-year-old, I believed her mother was the face of depression, a concept Allison and I knew from afternoons spent peeking in on soap operas and episodes of *Donahue* and *Oprah*. I didn't see much of Allison's mom because she was often either sick in a back bedroom or off at work. When she did appear, she had a tissue to her nose or eyes, and she spoke to Gran with the same whining tone Allison used, which was also the same I used with my mom.

Allison was a year younger than me, heavier than me, and had brilliant red hair, almost the same exaggerated color as the waxy hair of her Little Mermaid Barbie doll. She smiled with dimples and from the middle of the pool shouted "GRAY-ANNN!" as loud as she could whenever she wanted anything. Her voice echoed from house to house and back to us. I followed the sound with my eyes and whispered, "Allison! The neighborhood's going to think we're drowning!" Inevitably, after every call Gran opened the sliding glass door that divided the lanai from her bedroom and then either left to get Allison what she wanted or told her to get it herself; the one standing rule was that, unless there was an emergency, we were not to disturb

her during her program, *The Young and The Restless*, which was followed by *Oprah*. Just like my mom, she watched from behind some sort of partition that divided her activity from the slovenly act of only *watching* TV—just as Gran stood behind an ironing board, Mom was sure to be home, behind the kitchen counter, running the sink while her eyes drifted to the television set in the living room.

While Gran had her favorite program, Allison and I had our favorite things to do. My absolute favorite thing to do in the pool was dive into the deep end, get as low as I could (but not touch the drain, except on the biggest dares), sweep the crest of the cement bottom as it ascended into the shallow end, reaching as far as I could before my lungs burned and I surfaced. My second favorite thing to do was race. I imagined I was an Olympic swimmer in an adorable red-white-and-blue suit with glitter-crusted stars, and that I was gracefully churning water left and right, keeping the race tight until I beat my opponent at the very end with four completely unexpected kicks. I remember more of what I imagined than the actual outcomes of Allison's and my races—I was so bossy back then that it's not unlikely that if I lost a heat, rather than celebrate Allison's victory, I'd declare another lap, and we'd pad (almost running, but not, just walking as fast as we could on the slippery cement edge) back to the deep end to dive and surface and swim and swim and swim into a blinding, splashing fury that finally ended when our shaking arms grabbed the shallow end's side.

Another lap? Again, and again, and again, and again.

I always wanted contests while Allison always wanted to play pretend: dolls, Barbies, or just us as anything but ourselves. She was the only girl I'd ever played with who had a longer attention span for pretend play than I did, and she often brought Barbies into the pool, even

though that was against the rules because their hair could hurt the drain. I loved to play with the Barbies, especially Allison's because she had so many, and most of hers didn't come from garage sales, but I saw the pool as time to get away from them. As time to get a little closer to ourselves, pretending at least that we were other, more elegant people. More mature people. We were actresses, reading out lines to invisible cameras in the soap operas of our lives.

Together, we harbored the hope that at least one other person could believe we might be pretty enough to be a pure princess or charismatic enough to get the attention of boys without a single word. There was always a little fear of rejection in the pretend game: what if the other person said there was no way we could be Olympic swimmers or princesses? Even young, we were aware of that vulnerability.

One day by the pool, Allison told me her mother didn't love her. "Sure she does," I said.

"Then why does she lock me out of her room?" she asked. I didn't have an answer.

Girls who create homes for dolls out of the hidden worlds beneath wicker chairs and love seats and in the corners behind end tables can't stand closed doors.

The worry that we didn't have the looks or the grace or the personality to be taken seriously, to be loved, was there in our play. It was in the characters whose lives we dared to step into, though our young brains could not have parsed it. We still had the defense mechanism youth offers; we had the naiveté of childhood protecting us from looks of pity. Deep-down, we knew we would not star in sitcoms, but we did not know why. We knew we wouldn't win 200-meter butterflies. We didn't even know how to do the butterfly. There were possibilities, though. There was the length of the pool. There was the possibility of marriage, of real babies to one day replace all the Barbies and Cabbage Patch dolls with yarn hair. We didn't understand

where the line wavered between reality and fantasy, but we knew that it was there. We had worlds that could be blinked away. And together, we could play.

\* \* \*

The Crosby pool is twenty-five feet long, four feet deep. It's one big, blue rectangle. At any point in my swim, I could stand if I needed to, even on the drain.

Middle-aged triathletes convene here some afternoons, discussing events with such pomp I want nothing more than to beat them, which I try to do privately, setting my own finish line.

I've been kicked. I've been hit. I've swallowed water just like when I was five, even when I've been the only one swimming. That's why I remember. My goggles fill with water, and the old panic hits me again: logic tells me only the plastic over my eyes is filling, and if I close my eyes I won't know the difference, but once the water rises and the tile line on the pool floor blurs, no amount of logic will stop the sensation of my lungs filling like sponges. My heart grabs hold of my ribs. Everything constricts. I'm twenty-four, old enough to vote, pay bills, invite men to my apartment, and get a master's degree, but I have to shake my head just like I'm four years old, rip the rubber band of my goggles from my face, and stand until the blur burns away and the truth reveals itself—my eyes had been covered in water. That was all. There was no reason for me to choke.

For a second, I stand, cold in the shoulders. Then I lower myself, kick off the bottom, flip my ankles up, and I'm back to being vulnerable, back to being small, back to being a sliver among undulating waves, thinking *grace, grace, grace*. One day, I couldn't convince myself I was a swimmer. I returned to the edge tired, my muscles no longer pliant rubber bands but instead brittle ones, ready to snap.



One day, over the din of lunch-hour adult splashes, one of those triathletes, a large man in a Speedo, said to his friend in the next lane, “I just beat the waves until they submit.”

I looked at the clock but didn’t register the time. As a kid at the beach, I used to yell at the waves in the gulf. I used to jump and kick at them. I knew I wouldn’t stop them, though. Waves don’t bruise. They just divide and wash over you. To really beat them, you have to take a deep breath, point your fingers, shut your eyes, and aim your dive right into the wave’s heart. The only way to beat them is to pass under while they pass over and then emerge on the other side in enough time to breathe again before the next wave hits. Sometimes they pile up, and then you’re screwed, taking in a mouthful of salt water instead. Sometimes they seem to work together against you. But usually you can take the subversive approach. Dive and conquer.

In a pool, the more you fight, the more the waves reach back up to slap you again. A friend of mine had worn bruises on her arms as badges of a lifestyle I did not understand. She volunteered her submission, took her bruising as signs of love. Of understanding something that could not be articulated any other way.

I noticed the dark spots on Julie’s arm one night as we got out of her car Downtown to see a show for a band I’d never heard of but were a nationally-known independent dance rock act, Radio 4. I wore wine-colored leather boots with four-inch heels, jeans rolled up to reveal the boot leather against my calves. She was just starting to wear her bruises out, like she was testing a new accessory. She was sensitive to reaction. In the world of fashion, and, apparently, in the world of S&M relationships, certain accessories mark entry into a club. Side-swept bangs: indie-rock kid, derivative. Band button-bedecked blazer-bearer with rectangular glasses: über-bookish indie girl; editor or librarian. Guy with small chest, clever T-shirt, and hair that looked “done”

even though he swore he woke up that way: video-game developer-turned-bass-player. Leather-boot revealing girl in Gap jeans, flipping iron-straightened hair that's already starting to frizz in the neon lights: college girl with a fashion identity crisis who's trying to hide it by dressing like Sarah Jessica Parker and pretending it was her own idea. In my efforts to be sexy, I probably came off kindergarten-cute and sweeter than ever.

And then there were my friend's bruises. To those in the know, they meant something. They marked public admission to a lifestyle feared and not understood by many, and as such held all the more precious to those involved in it. Julie would later wear more obvious marks of her lifestyle, such as a leather band bracelet featuring handcuffs. She called it her "reminder" while she was at work. I didn't think I'd forget.

"Your *what* marks?" I asked, dodging a puddle and trying not to lean on a downward slope as I made my way to the club.

"My Mark marks. I belong to him." I'm sure my mouth opened before I met her eyes again. Her eyes were open wide, looking for some response that I looked for right back in hers.

I blinked. "You belong to him? Do you hear yourself?"

Yes, she did. She'd never been happy to belong to someone before, and now she knew that this was who she was meant to be with. This was who she was meant to be. A submissive.

"But you're bruised! How can that be a good thing?"

More of that look, so intense that I had to turn away. My heels hurt already. "Okay," I said. I didn't know a lot about love.

My ex-boyfriend and I had slept on a mattress close to the floor of a room he'd inherited from a friend. That friend's ex-girlfriend's hand prints had still climbed the walls. Finger marks

were everywhere, if we looked. He wasn't bothered by it, but I wanted to scrub the walls clean. I wanted a new mattress, uninherited. I wanted personal histories as thin as a sheet of tissue paper. Too much could be told through the body's limitations, through what one could do and what one couldn't. How far one was willing to bend. One's sexual comfort level was the unspoken testament to her sexual history. On dance floors, bodies spoke languages I couldn't understand. I could barely dance in public, and in those days, I didn't even swim.

I spent most of that evening sitting in a chair at a high-top, waiting for the show to begin because the balls of my feet felt like fire when I stood. My friends and I sipped drinks and laughed in the low lights. Julie's bruises weren't noticeable, not unless you were really looking for them.

After hours of waiting, the show finally began. We made our way to the dance floor. I sloped down the steps. The band was made up of skinny men in skinny jeans who played indie dance rock while they bounced around behind electric guitars. For an hour and a half, I forgot about the fire in my feet. I forgot about bruises and Mark marks.

Without drinks or the imposed beat of the bass drum and the flattering glow of neon lights, I didn't trust my body not to fail me. I jumped and flailed and mirrored my bruised friend's dance-experienced arms, hips, knees. I jumped so hard I thought the heels would break right off my boots. If they had, I still would have gotten my money's worth. I had chosen them, and I would wear them and dance in them and ruin them if I had to. The music dimmed the pain, and when we re-entered the heavy Florida air, it felt fresh after several hours inside the smoky bar. We took long strides toward the car with quick glances into alleys before stepping across

them. My ears rang and feet burned and I feared my ankles would just fold to the side before we made it to the car.

Safe in the passenger's seat, door locked to the night, I unzipped my boots immediately. The CD player burst with *Le Tigre*, and there wasn't any more talk of those marks. I walked barefoot from the car to my apartment.

The next day, I couldn't walk. Pain radiated from my toes up my legs. My mind hummed with music I didn't know and wouldn't hear again, and the muscles along the back of my neck shivered in their memories of bad dance and sweaty head-shaking while I'd tried desperately not to care what I looked like or about bruises or being alone or prints on walls.

After that ex had left, I had a hard time with music. He and I had shared a lot of it, as he introduced me to bands whenever possible. We had spontaneous soundtracks for everything, and I remember listening to Green Day and the *Garden State* soundtrack on drives to and from his apartment. After he left for the other side of the country, I didn't stop playing these songs. He gave me his record player, and when I'd played the Bright Eyes break-up songs and the Rilo Kiley "More Adventurous" songs and the Decemberists' suicide pact ballads ("If you don't love me, let me go") and the Killers' moving-on dance floor anthems about jealousy so many times on CD in the car and on vinyl at home that the first chords of all of them sent me close to vomiting, I finally turned to my mom's store of John Denver and Simon and Garfunkel. I went to bed and woke up feeling sick. But I couldn't stop playing the records.

One day at a semester's end, I had papers strewn all over the floor. I was organizing, listening once again to *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, trying to tap into a cultural moment I didn't know that belonged to these singers and my mother. I tried to channel a cultural moment I'd

once felt a part of, the one made up of cherry-flavored tongues in back booths and wandering hands and keeping the secret of g-strings tight beneath my jeans while I lay on the floor listening to “The Boxer” during parties with other aspiring poets. All of that in my head, and I was surrounded by papers, just stupid school papers, scarred by ink that tried to imprint something of some kind of ambition. All I had to do was put these marked-up rectangles in a binder, snap the rings shut, turn them in. But piling some of them was all I could do. The bass drum’s beat pounded the insides of the old speakers. This easy task, the last in a whole semester’s worth of work, stood between me and sanity. It required something of an organizational skill I didn’t possess. My mind was stuck four months in the past. My mind was stuck in the rests between beats of every passing measure.

Four months before, my mind had been stuck in the future, in what would become the present, when that person who held so much of my focus, if not my love, was gone. I was a 45 stuck on 33, playing in a key too low, too slow, with a voice too small to understand.

I needed to get the music out of my head. On went “The Boxer.” Up went the volume. I returned to the floor, facing the white wall, my bed behind me but not offering support, papers shoved up against the wall, the volume so loud the speakers sputtered. My ears hurt immediately. This was worse than the bass noise at a concert. This shook my stomach, my chest, my throat, my eyes, my ears.

I’ve read that when music is too loud, you lose the ability to hear that particular too-loud pitch forever. I thought of this as Simon and Garfunkel blasted their music through me. If those were the last sounds I ever heard, I could do worse. But what if their chords were only approximations of the best sounds possible—a future baby’s cry, maybe? And what if I lost the

chance to hear those approximations, and I might not get to hear the real thing for decades, if ever? What if I lost my ability to recognize them again? I could have drowned in those chords. Or I could have turned the fucking music down.

I don't know how many tones I permanently lost that day. How many chords would no longer sound full. I wasn't sure I would miss them.

The connection between self-imposed pain and beau-imposed pain did not take the shape of real, cogent thoughts on the night of the Radio 4 show with Julie. My feet hurt, and she had bruises. She said she liked belonging to him. She needed to belong to him, whether I liked it or not. And she'd need friends if it didn't work out. I had no one to belong to. Not right then.

That day with the triathletes at the pool, I choked on more than my fair share of chlorine. I turned my head to breathe only to meet hills of water instead of air, and I squeezed my eyes shut against the memories of past waves: other kids' splashes; white water rushing down from those novelty waterfalls that ran down from raised whirlpools in friends' pools, their edges too slippery to grab onto; the tear-you-apart tongues of gulf waves that used to shove me into the sharp sand and then rip me back in the end. I got caught in my share of riptides, learning young to give in and keep my head above water until I could catch the wave off guard and swim at an angle toward Mom on the shore of Siesta Key a few feet at a time, getting sucked and spat out until I finally made it to shore.

That man thought he'd beat the water into submission. I'd spent twenty minutes fighting his domineering waves. I kicked off the side again, reached forward with my left arm, leaned in. I swiveled on my body's imaginary axis. The water could have been a lake thick with swimmers

and alligators or the waves of the gulf. More chop wouldn't have mattered. My heart rate was up, and I had a mission. That guy was going to beat the water into submission, and if I kept fighting, I would get beaten, too.

Another stroke: reach to the right. Lean in. Swivel.

Reach to the left.

Waves rippled over my head. The sensation of swimming at Allison's rushed back. I was the one who came up with the stupid game. I was the competitive one. Line the rafts up, dive, and see how many you can swim under. We'd dived for rings in the shallow end before, but the water above had been clear and bright, and if we missed a ring, we could try again after we had surfaced and reassured ourselves that breath and dryness and sunlight were all there, accessible just a few feet from the pool's cold bottom.

If it was a game, it wasn't one we both played. The idea came to me while water pooled across my hips in my sagging raft. Allison floated nearby, eyes closed. I climbed out and surveyed the circling floats, where Allison was immersed in being thirty-five (a woman more interested in collecting freckles than in having to re-do her hair), and the rafts aligned themselves perfectly for my purpose: in the deep end, four drifted, right in a row, with only tiny cracks between them. I could make it that far. I'd dived, touched the uphill cement slope, and pawed my way into the shallow end many times. I'd never made it to the other wall, but these rafts only covered a little more than half the pool, anyway. If I dove right then, I could make it under before they moved much further with the current and drifted away from each other.

I aligned myself at the end of the pool, curling my toes against the rough edge. Raised my arms. Took a deep breath. Visualized my swan dive and ascent. Felt the tickle of panic

flutter from pelvis to throat, as it did before every dive, and in the split-second I was airborne, I felt the too-familiar, inescapable rush of images, visual and tactile, rooted in memory and fed by fear—the sting of a belly flop, the triumph of bumping my palms against the bottom, the burn of my chest, the panic I'd feel when I looked up and realized the glitter of the sun was so, so, so far away, the question of whether it would hurt to hit my head against the bottom and sever my spinal cord. All of this at once, and then my hips dipped into the cool water, and I was all relief and concentration. The action came too fast for me to think about what was next. I arced my arms in front of me, like a sea turtle. I swiveled my hips to guide me like a dolphin. I bypassed the zebra lines of the drain without touching it. I grazed the bottom of the pool with my palm as I swam over, imagining myself a manatee, feeling my way through sea weed and jellyfish.

I tried to calculate how many rafts I'd swum under, but I was too late to be accurate. The water was darker than I'd ever seen it, not a crack of light coming through the rafts above me. There was no way to know how many might have drifted into formation behind them since I'd dived in. With my hands I felt the pool's cold floor. Time to angle up. I squeezed my eyes shut against the water's downward pull. If I kept myself as close to the bottom as possible, I'd have no choice but to keep swimming forward before I swam up. Then I'd bypass the four rafts, plus some. My cheeks felt tight. That must have been what balloons felt like, always holding their breath.

A few more feet and I opened my eyes, Still darkness, no cracks of light. My ribs squeezed tight around me. Instinct begged me to breathe. I had to fight instinct with logic, even at that age. *If you breathe in, you will choke on water. If you breathe in water, you will die.*



I assured myself that the sun was up there, shining in through the screen, that I only had to go a little farther to look for the glitter through the water and the rafts and the screen and the clouds and then just! aim! up!, but when I opened my eyes again, there was no sun, no glitter, just darkness. Had the clouds swallowed the sun? I should have surfaced by then. Where was the top? I stopped moving, and the water carried me in the same direction, up toward the blackness. Up, and I'd be free! Up, and I'd breathe.

*Don't breathe in*, I reminded myself. *Don't breathe in*.

Air bubbles escaped my nose. One by one they rose ahead of me, relieving the pressure but also bringing me dangerously closer to involuntarily sucking in. They came out in torrents, four or five at a time, and I wrinkled my nose and lips and eyes, anything to keep myself from accidentally opening my mouth. My nose was nothing more than a pinhole, I imagined, letting air leak out little by little as I rose.

I had to surface. I didn't care how far I'd gone. I was going to burst. With all the energy I could surge, I punched up into the grayness, fist first. I hit plastic. Plastic that barely moved. Now, light wedged itself between the aligned rafts, but they only bumped together, separated just enough to allow the hope of light, and nestled back together. I kept punching.

The plastic had sealed itself to the water's surface. I punched again and again and again. The crack grew wide enough for me to force my hand in. Punch, grab, slip. Punch, grab, slip. All the air came out of my mouth, and I clamped my jaw closed again.

I cried underwater. I screamed for my friend without words, without opening my mouth.

Through that crack, I saw the sun, way, way up there, and I felt like I was being sucked farther from it, maybe by the evil depths of the drain where there lived alligators and sharks and

killer whales bigger than those anyone ever saw in the regular lakes and gulfs and seas. I was caught in a vacuum like the characters in the cartoon at the beginning of *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*, even though the laws of physics rushed me upward. No matter how fast I moved, the rafts would still block me. My chest contracted. My nostrils flared. For an instant, I saw myself dead under the weight of all that plastic and air, floating back-up against a translucent, hot pink raft. Allison would call Gran, Gran would unslide the door, frustrated at the disturbance, and realize this was real a moment too late. I cried for myself and for my mom and my dad, for how the sun could always blister my shoulders but was still so so so far away.

And then my head hit the plastic again. Both arms felt air and grabbed something slimy over my head and shoved it away and took fists of water. It was there that I emerged, finally breaking suction and knocking a pink raft to its side, face streaked with tears, my armpits filled with sweat.

I wrapped myself in a thick towel hanging from the clothesline and brought my knees to my chest in one of the cushy, peach-striped chairs. Allison's eyes were big, ready for drama. "I—". I looked out into the water, the floats disturbed, rocking. "I think I almost drowned." Allison looked out at the water and then to Gran's sliding-glass door. I waited for the panic, the "GRAY-an!" call, the sympathy. But maybe logic got the better of her, too. We both knew that telling Gran might mean no more pool. Telling Gran might mean constant supervision, and not just through a sheet of sliding plate glass with Oprah in the background and the iron set to press. Telling Gran might mean that Mom would second-guess my judgment or that she would second-guess her trust in Gran. Mom might second-guess me and the way she'd once told me not to do

anything I didn't want to do, even if an adult was telling me to do it. I didn't want to get that close to drowning. I'd rather not swim at all than to try to swim and fail.

This mentality followed me for decades, fighting me through school projects and papers and opportunities to train for triathlons and other athletic events.

But then, Allison was listening, and I had a story. "I couldn't get through," I said. "Why didn't you save me?"

"I didn't know."

"I could have drowned." She shrugged, but her eyes were big. And I hadn't drowned.

Clouds rolled over, as usual, sea cows floating in the sky. We bit into crisp grilled cheese sandwiches, savored the salt of butter on our tongues without knowing we were doing so. Cherry Coke filled our already air-bloated bellies with more and more bubbles until we burped and giggled. It rained, and it was all I could do not to fold my arms on the beveled glass table and cry and cry out every last grain from my salt-coated eyes.

The triathlete's waves rocked me, but I kept reaching. What if I moved with the waves rather than against them? What if I let that water push and pull me to the other side, instead of fighting? What if I used the resistance of the water to my advantage, imagining it challenging and pushing me, rather than as an unbeatable adversary? I kicked off the wall again and moved with that big man's waves. Under them. Through them. Through Allison's pool and the thrill of diving and darting underwater in a perfect arc, fighting the memory of the sun so so so far away. Coming up for breath and back to my boyfriend's door and those anxiety-ridden day-after-date swims, this anxiety a positive proof that things were going to be okay. Back

underwater, I resolved that, should we separate, I would not cry on the floor. I would not rely on the pain of wobbly ankles to remember who I was. Sure, I would hurt, but it wouldn't come in the old ways. Another quick breath. I leaned to the left. I didn't have to do anything I didn't want to do. Even if things didn't turn out okay, the fact that I had a person to worry about, someone enough I cared enough about to worry about, meant everything. Having a place to kick out my fear of ending up alone and making poor decisions meant everything. My hips and shoulders responded to these thoughts. I hit the other wall and turned around. My body still moved, even when my thoughts eddied around each other, getting stuck in the hard-worn crevices of my brain, those neurological paths that have found comfort in anxious thoughts simply because they are patterns. They are survivable even though they are unpleasant.

I tried to keep my worries about the future positive as they tugged the heavy limbs of memories: the taste of an almond latte at the coffee shop with the dirty floor; the sagging couch with the black stain in the threaded fabric; the pleasant owner's face when I told her I'd met my boyfriend there. He'd come for the coffee and I'd come for the show. It didn't have to end horribly just because I was happy then.

Triathlon Guy was going to beat the waves into submission, but I was going to beat him.

My kicks off the edge came quicker, and when my hands and feet did touch the familiar, rough cement at either end of the pool, they hit with more momentum. Just as when I swam alone, when I turned around, I hit the current of my own velocity, still moving toward the wall I'd just pushed against. That current pushed my hair into my eyes. The rush pushed my cheeks back, almost into a smile.

The slickness of childhood. In that instant I knew that this was why I returned to the water that tested my body image and tore apart my bathing suits and dried out my eyes. I did it for this childhood feeling.

Allison's house. We had two summers before her mother remarried and moved her away.

A first-date embrace, nervous but firm, in a parking lot at the end of the night, surrounded by puddles reflecting a streetlight's glitter.

Flying in the water next to an arrogant old man.

I desperately sought the high of this childhood feeling, and not the one I'd always associated with yelling lifeguards and desperate under-water fantasies. No. The elemental freedom of being a creature in water not upset by manmade rules and rubber rafts. To simply swim for the sheer pleasure of it, for the safe feeling that comes from finally relaxing into forward motion.

To do what my body told me to do.

I re-enter the water to find the childhood feeling of completeness connection and freedom, even if I know it's dangerous. Even I, a healthy, young adult, could asphyxiate on the water. I could pull a muscle and have to be dragged poolside by an eighteen-year-old lifeguard. When I call my boyfriend, a year together after meeting in the coffee shop, I still feel a flutter of the same tension that swept through me on diving boards when I was a child. Every phone call, even after all this time, offers an opportunity for rejection. No matter how much logic tries to calm me, this thought automatically releases adrenaline into my system. I prepare to fight or run.

And I gather myself up for the thing that makes me call—the potential reward. The endorphin rush that comes before relaxation when I hear his “yes.” The relief when I hear his voice behind my door.

At first, I thought my lap-swimming, post-date anxiety was a prediction of the future of the relationship. With the right man, my muscles wouldn't worry. With the right man, I'd immediately relax, sink in, and quit hunching my shoulders, even in traffic. The clenched fist beneath my left shoulder blade from stress that makes my arm go numb would dissolve.

I have not completely relaxed. But my muscles curl up around his shoulders. My arms move into place before I think about it. I used to scrutinize moves like this, but now I breathe and lean into him, feeling nothing between our shoulders and necks and elbows but heat.

If I really spent my whole life searching for enlightenment through relaxation, I'd end up even more tense than I already am. Complete comfort may be a myth. I've been worrying since I was four and my sister was stillborn. Worry is in my blood.

Just like on the diving board, I see the possible future in a flash of memory mixed with imagination whenever I have an anxiety trigger. Here's the phone ringing, ringing, ringing, never to be answered to my name flashing on his cell phone screen again. Me, on the floor, eardrums vibrating, stomach acid rising into my throat. Eyes stinging. Me running, old music in my ears, just to trying to remember who I was before the ex-boyfriend, who I am with this single footfall, who I might be in the future, when I pick this leg up and press the other down.

Sometimes all I was in the past, in the worst moments, was that one little movement, that instant of complete weight on my tired ankle. A wobble and a steadying no one else saw or felt or cared about but me. The montage of possible futures flips by: there I am, devastated.

Shrugging my shoulders. Throwing back a drink. Sinking into a couch, gagged by too much alcohol, sweaty with regret before I've even done something to regret. Memories propel me into the future. I'm in a hospital, looking into the faces of another man's kids. Thinking, *I can't believe I thought that was happiness* when that was my exact thought the first time someone I liked expressed a like for me in return. In this way, the swizzle stick of fear mixes an icy cocktail of memory, possibility, hope, and happenstance. Every possibility begets another wrong decision I might make.

This is why I keep calling. Why I keep coming up for breath. I answer the door when I hear his knock. His face brightens when he opens the door, and I recognize it with the same familiarity as the cement wall at the end of the pool that allows me an opportunity to breathe or flip back for another round. If ever I feel doubt, all I have to do is open the door. My facial muscles relax. I fall into him before the door shuts out the birds of paradise in the courtyard behind him.

Is there really a way to know for sure if someone loves you as much as you love him?

Is there anyone you can trust more than your own ankles? And in the end, can you really trust them?

And then there's the embrace.

Another friend returned to a husband who cheated. She said she couldn't help imagining herself with children from another man, always wondering what faces this marriage would have produced.

And then there's that embrace. Again.

Who can blame anyone for looking for the stronghold, for digging through the muck for it, over and over again?

Julie lost a lot of friends when she came out as a sub. I was almost one of them. But I thought that if she'd bruise for him, then if he one day dropped her for good, she'd get hit hard. And she'd need someone. I understand needing someone to recognize.

She slid into the arms of a boyfriend who produced nickel-sized welts. After a few years together now, they've learned to coast each other's emotions. I can certainly understand the appeal of the kind of joy that brings radiation—such heat radiates from the forehead and turns back to burn the kisser's lips. I can also understand, now, what it's like to know someone and to know that, for all your paired flaws and good points, you have something together. Something not everyone can understand because you can't even describe it.

Who's to say that any man isn't going to cause a little pain in the end, even if it's by holding a woman as hard as he can?

The right embrace: a lean into the collarbone, soft heat of skin, reassuring touch of stubble against your damp forehead.

A pool full of water, lifting.

It's really right there in my cells, just waiting to release. I wait for it when I kick off, reach out, and let the waves wear themselves out over me and the unforgiving cement walls. I wait for it every time I tag the wall. I'll probably always try to out-reach my worries, no matter how much I convince myself this is futile. But there comes a point in every workout when I forget how long it's taken to go twenty-five yards. At some point, I smile. Just like before I learned how to swim.



## CHAPTER FIVE: WRITING LIFE ESSAY

My problem with this thesis is that it took more than thirty seconds to write. I tried to imagine the progress of the past year and a half as a long haul, a high-resistance, slow ride up a hill. I tried breaking the big parts into smaller stories, smaller goals, thirty-second sprints. But I had trouble marking the victories. Sprints I can handle. Same with ten-minute climbs. I need to watch the second hand of a clock and watch time move while I move with it.

I used to think I was a climber, but now I know I'm a sprinter. A sprinter in mind, a climber in body. In cycling, this means I love the mentality of knowing there's an ending ahead and exactly when it will come, even if I'm actually much better, physically, at long, slow climbs and steady endurance rides than I am at bursts of power. I'm a one-draft writer. My essays are most cohesive in their first drafts. Through revision of these essays, I've learned that my best method is to start back at the beginning of each and work my way through, instead of sloughing my way through a particular section and separating sections. With each read, I focus on one issue or theme. I get overwhelmed if I feel like I'm losing sight of the bigger picture. I get overwhelmed if I don't know exactly how much time I have left and how exactly to spend it.

True, I've known I would have these fifteen months. I did not realize how used I was to the short intervals of academic life: fifty-minute class periods, three sessions a week, fifteen weeks a semester. With all the workshops I've taken, my initial thesis process did not change much from the processes I've established: notes and ideas started forming long before the words to essays marched onto my laptop's illuminated pages. As before, I wrote my first drafts in

single sittings, writing until long after my CDs had played themselves out. Then I left them for a few weeks before returning for revisions.

Organization of these essays and their smaller parts has been my greatest challenge. When I wrote first drafts of those essays with multiple parts, I did so in one sitting. My mind made organic transitions from one memory to another, transitions based on visual image, sound, and the essay's overall theme. I started each with a mental question: what am I so afraid of? Why do I reference this music so often? Why does it bother me that someone just insulted my favorite band? Why is my friend's marital issue hitting me so hard? And then I work my way to an answer—or several answers—pulling in past experience, cultural observations, and references to things I'd read and heard. For this reason, the logic may not always be clear, but the essays should flow. They should approach answers to these questions. Their order is tenuous, and, though I have done some reorganization, as in the essays that make up "Tourist Trap" and the sections in "Near Drowning," that was a difficult process, requiring me to really consider what each sub-essay contributed to the whole. In the case of "Near Drowning," my first order of sections was anachronistic, and while they did build on each other, the third section carried most of the weight, so I wove details from the other two sections in. For "Home is a Swing Set," I kept the vignettes in their original order, as this one relied most directly on the connections between memories.

I write long essays, and my voice has changed in the past several years, but one stylistic detail has remained constant, even through experiments to try to change it: I write long essays made up of chunks of memories and images that cycle thematically. I've done this since my first nonfiction workshop, and now that I've studied poetry, I see that not relying on narrative does

not have to be a detriment; poems often tell the stories of the relationships between images and how words look and sound, leaving the readers with impressions that tell stories, rather than relying on logic. At first, I resisted surreal and language poetry. I was challenged to write an exact mimic of an Andre Breton poem, “Sunflower,” and I did so by replacing each word by another of the same part of speech, using a translation. This is a long poem, and as I got through the first stanza, I noticed something happening: I was describing a particular place in my mind, and the words I chose were influenced by the sounds of those in the translation, but they also reinforced the environment I had subconsciously evoked. In the end, my poem did have narrative, but I wasn’t trying to tell a story; I was trying to invite the reader into the world of the speaker’s apartment, full of moldy oranges. I was translating the reader into the speaker’s head using images rather than logic, even using images that bent logic.

This study has had an incredible influence on what I’ve done here. Part of my struggle with organization has been a duel between logic and truth. The accurate translation of surreal, from the French prefix “sur”, is super-real. Unexpected transitions can expose a lit corner one has ignored. Exploring such transitions can help us figure out what they might mean to us. But imposing logic on them where it doesn’t belong, imposing order on truth and memory, both of which are complicated and layered, can actually bastardize the tone that memory is attempting to convey, so we miss the message as we try to parse it.

What I’m trying to do most of all is relay the messages of memory.

I hope this explains some of the stylistic choices here. My reading was a big influence—combining traditional memoirs with book-length, modular formats; journalistic essays with personal essays; and novels that mixed past and present with poems that burrowed deep inside

one moment. My best analogy for my approach is that I pointed a magnifying glass on each moment and then zoomed out, zipped over to the next moment the way planes fly over maps in old movies, leaving dotted lines behind them, and then I zoomed-in and magnified again. To do this, I wrote my drafts and put them away until I could look at them again freshly and objectively, with as little memory of what I might have been trying to accomplish as possible.

While this process has tested my stamina, it has also tested my confidence. In my workshop courses, I'd been encouraged to "finish" a piece for my final. This often meant filling notebook pages with fragmented ideas until, deadline pressing, I sat down and wrote marathon revisions, usually completely starting my stories and essays over again while mixed CDs rotated in the background.

As I wrote this collection, that final-draft sprint has merged with the beginning, note-writing climb when the essay is only in its nebular stage. With tangential ideas and memories spouting off of each other, I was often confused as to what scene or story or descriptive phrase or character belonged where—in a completely different essay, in a different section of one essay, or as a revision of an existing essay. I've liked the idea of having space to stretch out and explore such cyclical thought patterns. In practice, however, the lines between plots and settings and times have become blurred. The story here has changed from my proposed idea. I have not written six distinct essays or one narrative straight-through exploring how my sister's stillbirth has affected me. That story has taken a more truthful place in this collection—it's an undercurrent, a pulse inside everyday life. Form and function connect through memories, present moment, and future anxieties as they all simultaneously feel the effects of physical surroundings. I feel the influence, the rush, of all of this every time I sit down to write.

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