



oakwood

oakwood

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Nebraska  
Kelsey Reifert

Lonely  
Kasi Johnson

14

I slid my feet under the covers of you, Nebraska.  
Purposefully and slowly.  
Everywhere I stepped outside the field-patchwork-quilts  
My skin cells became seeds.  
I grew flowers where my toes were under the soil,  
Using my heels to aerate the ground like Impressionist painters.

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## She Pushes, He Pulls

Morgan Hough

16

As dawn breaks over the farm yard, only Elsie hangs her head over her stall door with ears pricked for breakfast. My heart jolts as I peer over the first stall door to find Bella stretched out on her side, her chestnut flanks lathered in sweat. In most cases, foaling occurs without help, so I just watch.

The minutes crawl by. The straw is soaked. Bella is straining. I still don't see the foal. I should see two front legs and a nose by now—nothing. I stand on my tiptoes with my hands gripping the stall door. Everything I've read in *The Complete Book of Foaling* pops into my head. Once the water breaks, the foal must be born in twenty minutes or less because the foal's oxygen supply has been cut off. Sometimes, it is possible the foal needs to be repositioned (both front soles pointing down and nose on top) by a veterinarian for the birthing to continue.

The longer I watch, the more certain I am that Bella needs help.

Twelve impossible miles stretch between us and the nearest veterinary facility. Panic lingers in my fingertips. I try to stay positive, reminding myself that Bella carried her foal past term so the foal is oversized and she simply needs help pushing.

I could have never imagined this emergency a couple months ago when I saw these two broodmares for the first time. They stood placidly at a hay feeder ankle deep in snow; their fluffy winter fur added to the size of their bellies. They lifted their heads from the hay bale as they watched us climb the fence dressed warmly in heavy jackets and boots. I remember that the yard light illuminated the cramped lot and beaten barn as twilight encroached. The man's breath hung in the frosty air as he slowly explained that these aren't his horses. They were his brother's. The man shifted his weight and cleared his throat, glancing down at the churned up snow.

17

“My brother is dead.”

Heart pounding, I decide to race to the house and find my dad. When we return, my dad swings the stall door open without a word and steps through the deep bed of straw. He probably doesn't notice that I cleaned the stall and added extra straw last night. The stall dimensions are just right (16' x 20' because *The Complete Book of Foaling* said so).

During the precious minutes that have now passed, the foal is just now becoming visible. My dad's calm composure spills over my nerves. Dropping to his knees, he takes hold of the slippery sac that encases the oversized foal. Relief washes over me as I see two teacup hooves with soles pointing downward.

Lips pursed in concentration, my dad pulls down firmly with each contraction. I stand rooted to the ground outside the stall with wide eyes. Dad's movements are confident, practiced. During lambing season, assisting the birth of baby lambs is routine for him. I'm just sixteen, so I pay close attention to my dad—knowing I need to command the same competence when I run my own horse farm.

Finally, I see a miniature muzzle. Time is short. The twenty minutes may already be up, so my dad quickly rips the sac encasing the foal and clears the mucous from its nostrils. The foal's first breaths rattle as air fills its lungs. Still lying flat on her side, Bella thrashes her legs. Dad adjusts his grip on the sac covered in mucous and blood, pulling down slowly but with great force. The foal's neck and shoulders appear. Dad works with Bella—when she pushes, he pulls. Push and pull. Push and pull. My muscles tense with Bella's efforts.

I can still remember my excitement as I walked over to the mare closest to us in the dim lot and patted her neck with a gloved hand. Solid chestnut in color, she was big, with a

beautiful head and a soft eye. I ran my eyes over her well proportioned body, clean legs, short strong back, and massive shoulders. Sitting in the passenger's seat on our way home, I would name her Bella. I approached the other mare; dun colored, a dark dorsal stripe traced her spine. Black socks reach her knees, matching her mane and tail. Gauging threat with wary eyes, she stepped away from my outstretched hand. Her slender body frame contrasted with Bella's bulk; when she trotted across the lot, I noted her cat-like gate. Later, in the truck, I would name her Elsie.

Before she learns to walk, the foal lies limp in the straw. Elsie cranes her neck over the high partition to glimpse the new arrival. I let out a shaky breath and smile. Dad removes the rest of the sac encasing the filly's wet, matted coat; I can see her soft ribs like wash board ridges underneath. Bella scrambles to her feet and the umbilical cord breaks. Smiling, my dad stands and slips out of the stall. I latch the stall door closed behind him.

Bella whickers and turns to vigorously lick her foal as Dad and I watch. Encouraged, the foal begins to orchestrate standing. The filly's awkward legs seem too long, but then she's standing, legs splayed and knees wobbling. The gangly foal staggers to the warmth of her mother's body and nurses contentedly. As she swallows the warm milk, the filly's short curly tail swishes back and forth. Head hanging low, Bella stands with one hind foot cocked. The foal's belly stretches tight with milk; she folds up her legs and sinks to the straw. Satisfied, my dad and I back out of the barn, and with one last look at the cozy scene, carefully shut the door.

19

*"Due to [Father Eugene Buechel's] wonderful images, we are able to learn a little more about the adaptability of the Native Americans and reservation life during the first half of the 20th century."  
—South Dakota Art Museum Curator*

Handsome in our clothes of new fashion,  
My fake-flowered blouse flutters against my skin,  
Scratching.

*Beaded flowers dance on the tanned hide  
Like prairie blooms sway in the wind.*

pumps, ordered in a black punched-out leather pattern,  
Make me stand tall, curve my feet,  
Aching.

*Plush moccasins, close to the Earth,  
Feel the pump of Mother's heart beating.*

Starch white from neck to wrist,  
Suspenders wrapping, crossing from hip to hip,  
Cutting.

*Chest and shoulders open broad to the sun,  
Body free to run, chase, and hunt.*

Long, black locks cut shoulder length,  
Ends curled and hair half-pinned back,  
Binding.

*Plaited in ceremony, swaying past my waist,  
Wrapped in my child's hand.*

The Blue Forever

Patricia Murrill

Old Pump

Jordan Purintun

20

Shimmers of light and dark  
scatter across my vast horizon.  
Inhaling deep, capturing the scent;  
soft yet strong caresses from the Earth.

I dive into the sky,  
but am swallowed by the sea.  
Melding into one in the distance,  
they confuse my senses.

I can see eternity and the end,  
coexisting among these waves.

I can hear the gods whisper  
amid splashes and the wind,  
wondering the meaning behind  
their celestial conversations.

My eyes drown as my mind is lost  
on into the blue forever.

Cascading tranquil thoughts  
somber my restless soul.  
Letting the breeze carry my burdens  
as I slowly drift away,  
without a horse or a white knight,  
off into the sunset.

Swaying to the peaceful rhythm  
of this ancient lullaby.  
Drinking in clouds, grasping for stars,  
reaching for the sky.

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## Moonlight Climb

Joseph Stearns

22

Nothing worth doing had been accomplished on a hot lazy Sunday. Victor and Jared sat inside on the couch all day. When the idea of getting out of the house came up, the sun was already past its peak. "There's never anything to do around here." Victor scrolled through the channels on the T.V. Guide. "We should get some food."

"Let's go to Del Taco for cheap tacos. We could go drive around for a while or something. I'll drive." Jared grabbed his keys and was ready at the door before Victor had turned off the T.V.

"I suppose. Nothing better to do." Victor grunted and stretched as he got up from the couch. The young men made their way to the Del Taco drive-through down the street, and continued driving around as they ate their tacos. Jared pulled into a gas station and filled up the car. Victor went inside to buy some of what he called "adventure supplies."

Hours of aimless driving brought them to the white rocks. The setting sun in the west caused the shadows on the mountainside to slowly grow upward. Victor stood facing the white rocks to the east and the landscape seemed surreal, glowing orange and purple in the setting sun. Everything became black and white like an old western on T.V.

"Do you think we can make it to the top?" Jared looked to the peak.

"Of course we can conquer this bitch!" Victor lit two cigarettes and handed one of them to Jared. Taking a cigarette and inhaling deeply Jared took the lead.

"This way looks like it should work out," Jared said starting to walk through the dried up creek bed.

Victor followed Jared hopping unconsciously from rock to rock while he stared at the full moon. Sometimes he would step

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up onto one of the taller rocks and leap to another pretending he was avoiding lava flowing beneath him.

Just a sliver was missing from the moon, and Victor didn't know if it was waxing or waning. The moon made everything seem shades of silver and grey where shadows weren't hiding his surroundings. The combination of white rocks and the bright moon made their path easy to follow. Things in the distance were shrouded in darkness and shadows, but the immediate surroundings were almost as clear as day.

"It's like we're climbing in a black and white movie," said Victor.

"We should make a movie about our hiking called 'Gatorade and Cigarettes.'"

Victor laughed, "That would make for an epic adventure." While he was still chuckling about the idea Victor continued, "Two dudes living in the desert off Gatorade and Parliaments for a week would be intense."

Jared continued picking their way through the creek bed until the point where the gravel ended and a steep slant of rock stood ahead of them. The wall of white rock was steep but could still be climbed. The paths the water cut into the rock made for quality footholds and the stunted plants that managed to grow into the cracks held firm when the guys needed something to pull themselves up with their hands.

Following Jared, Victor looked up. A mountainside eight-hundred feet tall didn't sound that large until you stood at the bottom looking up. As he started to climb Victor kicked loose some rocks under his feet. They click clacked down to the bottom and scared off some animal into the bushes. Victor heard the rustle in the shrubs hidden somewhere in the shadows.

Up and up they climbed following the path cut into the rocks over the years. Victor could recognize everything he learned about rocks in geology class in his immediate surroundings. He was climbing up sandstone, which was the sedimentary remains of some ancient sand dune. The rock here felt smooth and grainy to his hands. The water cut through this rock easily when it ran down the mountain and provided an easy path to follow. Off to the right a different type of path led up the side of the mountain. Jagged black rock protruded into the side of the white rocks. This path was put here by some ancient shift in the earth below. The rocks seemed snapped and broken, and these remained unweathered by their time exposed to the surface. An attempt to climb this part of the mountain caused cut up hands and scraped knees.

Just up ahead of the boys the water path in the rock changed. The mountain sloped upwards off to the left which, over time, caused the path to be cut into the rock horizontally from left to right instead of vertically. The mountain seemed to be layered like the pages of a large, open book. Once the climbers began to scale this section of the mountain the sandstone began to flake apart. Edges of the mountainside exposed to erosion became weak.

"This sucks, we can't go up any further here," said Victor.

"Nah, don't worry man. Just follow me. We can make it." Nothing seemed to deter Jared. The two guys sat down to take a break before the next leg of their journey.

"How about another cigarette?" Jared sat on a small boulder with his legs crossed.

"Sure," said Victor as he pulled out a pair of cigarettes from the pack in his back pocket. Jared took one from him and handed him the bottle of lemon-lime Gatorade. "I bet Gatorade

would sponsor our T.V. show." Victor chuckled a bit and guzzled down a good portion of the bottle before handing it back to Jared. They lit their cigarettes and looked up. There were some clouds in the sky above. Black shapes hiding the stars. The moon was still showing bright, and kept the white rocks illuminated.

"We are going to zigzag up this to the top," said Jared pointing back and forth with his finger to trace the path he planned to take.

"Alright man, let's do this."

Victor and Jared made their way further up the side of the mountain. They focused on the placement of their hands and feet. This made the mountain feel like a pile of rocks. Before long the scenery below became a distant geometric pattern. Everything seemed like shapes when viewed from so far above.

"Man, it is getting cold." The heat of the day usually escapes from the desert at night. Victor thought it was cooling off earlier than usual.

The slope did not seem so steep on this part of the mountain, and Victor walked next to Jared now instead of behind him. Both guys were breathing heavily when they made it to the top. It was hard to ignore the quickly dropping temperatures at this point, and the wind picked up. Before they had a chance to sit down at the top for a victory cigarette it started sprinkling.

"How in the hell does it rain the one time we make it to the top? It rains five days a year, and today has to be one of those days." Victor seemed to question the sky. In response to his questioning the sky opened up and the light rain became a downpour.

"It would rain just when we get to the top," said Jared.

The strength of the downpour made it apparent to Victor

how canyons could be carved into rock over the millennia. Looking down the path they had climbed, Victor saw water carrying loose rock in a torrent downwards. Sheets of water ran across the folds of rock below.

"We can't go down that way," said Victor.

"We have to get down from this shit quick." Jared started walking off to the left to scope out the terrain. Victor followed him frantically. Every crack and crevice on the mountain was running with water. Victor slipped on the rock while trying to make his way down behind Jared.

"Wow this shit is slippery." Victor got up. Jared turned to look at him.

"We need to hurry down from this. Over here it is steeper, but at least the rock is broken up so we won't slide all the way to the bottom."

Victor followed Jared over to the place where all the water seemed to be collecting. A huge cut in the rock had been created over the years, and this seemed to be their only way down. Following the cut in the rock the guys worked their way downwards. Victor was surprised at how easy going this was. He no longer felt miserable from the wetness that had long since soaked through his clothes. Adrenaline filled him as he followed Jared down the ever widening cut in the rock.

The cut in the rock ended suddenly in a drop off. Victor thought it must be at least three times his own height down to the next level of rock. It was dark, and Victor couldn't see beyond his immediate surroundings.

"There is a tree growing out of a crack just down there." Jared pointed just below them to where a stubby tree was growing out of a crack in the rock. "We can jump down from that tree."

Victor watched Jared as he lay down on his stomach. Water was hitting him in the face and rushing around him over the drop. Jared caught hold of a tree branch with his feet and lowered himself until he could grab on. "Come on, it's easy."

"I can't make it!" Victor shouted in terror as he lay dangling his feet over the drop. Water was crashing into his face and getting into his nose and eyes. All he could smell was dust from the sediment he got up his nose. He couldn't see as he dangled there swing his feet to try and reach the tree.

"You got to make it. We can't go back up that even if I could get out of this tree. That water would wash us down with the rest of the rocks. Here I'll grab your feet."

Victor swung his feet around feebly until Jared finally caught hold them and placed them on a branch. Victor scooted himself slowly over the edge of the drop and tried to grab the tree. His hand caught a branch and he lowered himself the rest of the way. The branch was slippery and he fell.

Victor woke up and tried to scream in pain, but he couldn't. For a second, Victor thought he must be dying. He struggled to talk. He was still unable to speak when Jared kneeled beside him.

"Are you alright, are you ok? Are you hurt? Oh God!" Jared shook Victor trying to see if he would respond.

Victor could only move his lips in response. When Jared started shaking him he knocked his hands away. Slowly Victor stood up trying to breathe. Finally Victor got his breath back.

"Whoa. That scared the shit out of me. I couldn't breathe or talk."

"Dude, you landed on your back and had the wind knocked out of you." Jared looked up at the tree. "Dude, look how far you fell! Holy shit I can't believe you didn't die."

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"I have heard of people falling farther out of motel balconies and living. Usually they break some bones or something," said Victor as he stood up limping with his hand on his right hip to support his weight. "I don't think I broke anything, but my hip hurts like a bitch."

Right below the drop was a pool of water cut into the rock by falling water. "Hey can I have some Gatorade?" asked Victor.

"I lost it somewhere man, sorry. Hey I have heard mountain water is some of the purest in the world lets drink from this puddle here."

"That would be a good thing to put in our movie," laughed Victor.

The guys continued following the path that had been cut over years and years of these random heavy rainfalls. By the time they got to the bottom and found the creek bed they had started following in the first place they were ahead of the water flow. They walked in the creek bed ahead of the water. Victor walked behind Jared watching the dried out creek bed become a stream. He quit walking behind Jared and walked in front of the water that was filling the creek. After a while he climbed onto one of the taller rocks and watched the water gush around him.

29

Bracken, withered bark tells tales, stale  
Swaying branches of leaves swing, feathered boas of lovely  
Dancers, revolve beneath willow-bough shade

Protective curtains hide lovers staying, swaying,  
Spending seconds, stolen time  
Together with the giver of hidden spaces  
Telling secrets, frou-frou with rustling fronds

Limbs lunge for dancers, secret  
Speakers sharing more stolen time  
Withered, flaking bark beckons picnics,  
Late-night rendezvous beneath stars

Becoming bows betray no secrets but  
Beg for dances, bow low, begin to sway,  
Rustlings of hot-pressed khakis,  
Dresses with beaded shawls whip, waltz  
Rushing wind through weeping arms

Lenticels, ears open, listen,  
Breathe in tender scenes and time-tested words  
Wind-taken whispers whirl through willow,  
Waking wishes, gaining sweetheart gazes  
Peeks from willow knot-eyes

Weeping, wailing, wanting more  
Grand, gallant bows, gestures lose date,  
Gaining a new time  
Stem stands, time lingers

Fox-trotting leaves frantically dart, dance,  
Dashing, draw in dreaming dears  
Weeping, willow, dances with itself,  
Waiting for wide-eyed darlings,  
Sway, steal time beneath worn, welcoming willow.

## Home Sweet Home

Laurelle Adkins

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## Just to Hear You Say That You Love Me

Amanda Rosse

30



31

The last night I spent time with a man I let myself deeply care for will never leave my mind. It was a cold, January night in Sioux Falls. We had just entered his newly acquired, gold SUV after eating with other friends, and like always, we had been talking about anything and everything, trying to relate it back to God.

I began to play with my hands in my lap, looking down at them as I let out the question, “Could you ever be friends with someone who is gay?” I began letting my head move up to stare out the front windshield, “knowing that God thinks it is wrong.”

“I don’t hate gay people,” he replied, his one hand remaining on the top of the wheel as he glanced over at me as streetlights passed over us, “but I don’t think I could be friends with someone who is gay. But I don’t know, because I have not had a gay friend.”

“Oh,” was all I could say. He made a sharp turn onto another busy street, and I noticed the familiar surroundings. Four more blocks and we would be to my home.

Suddenly, my breath was gone, as if someone had punched me in the gut, leaving me in pain. My whole body clenched up, and I closed my eyes—willing time to stop, almost begging it to. This was it. Soon he would be gone, and there was no going back to the same old Brown Hall with him in it. Never again would I see him walk out those first floor east doors to the lobby, walking how he always did, a little hunched over, but with confident power. Never again would I banter with him for hours over the foosball table. Never again would my world at South Dakota State be the same.



Noticing my silence, he turned and asked, "Why are you so quiet?"

"I don't know. I'm just thinking," I replied, letting my eyebrows crinkle in the streetlights. I did not want this to be over.

"I love this song," he said, trying to fill the silence, "Hillsong's music is my favorite."

I smiled and nodded, adding, "Yeah, they are pretty awesome;" I played with my fingers that escaped the warmth of my red pea coat. I wore it in the hopes he'd notice how it brought out my blonde hair.

"I think I want to cut my hair," I said.

"No," he said quietly, "don't change. Don't ever change. I like who you are."

Again, I felt a grin creep up and replied, "I won't."

The car made a crunching noise as it pulled up to the front of my parents' double wide. This was the end. I looked over at him and sighed, not able to say what I wanted. This was it, this is where I could finally tell him how I felt. *Come on Mandy, open your mouth, my mind urged, just do it. Tell him you love him, how much he means to you!*

"Well," he began, "I want to thank you so much for the time we had together. You really have meant a lot to me. I am going to miss you in Kansas."

"Yeah."

*That's not what you are supposed to say!*

"I'm going to miss you too. You have meant a lot to me."

Across the seat we pulled into an awkward hug, and I got out of the car, willing myself not to turn into putty when my feet touched the hard ground. I watched as he drove away from my door and then proceeded to walk, numbly up the snow-covered

stairs. I opened the dirty, white door and glided through the kitchen, paying no attention to the surroundings.

I stared silently ahead, making my way towards the back of the trailer, to the door on the left, my door. I threw my coat off, and fell onto my bed. He was really gone. He was gone and with him, so was my heart. There was only one thing I could do, and one tear fell softly down my cheek, followed by countless others.

I enter my dorm room and sit down on my un-lofted bed next to my roommate. A large grin spreads over my face, and she looks up from her computer with her chestnut-brown bangs falling into her face, and she asks me, "Why are you smiling so funny?"

My mouth gets wider, and I whine, "Be-cky, help me."

"Why?" she replies, looking at me confused.

"There's this boy..." I spend the next half hour describing the new crush I have in detail to her.

She looks at me, and asks, "Does he like you?"

"I don't know." *That's not the point, the point is I like him.*

For weeks after this first conversation, we sit in the same position, her on her chair and me on my bed that sits under hers and talk about this boy, *him*. Eventually, it always ends up with her asking, "So why don't you tell him?"

I grab my blue-violet body pillow in a hug, bite my lip in contemplation, and say, "no."

"Why not?"

"Because that's the man's job. I want to be pursued," I say instead of what I really mean—I don't think I am good enough for any man.

"Just because you tell him doesn't mean you can't be pursued," she says, seeing through my excuses.

I cross my arms over my chest and finally admit, “I can’t.”

“Why can’t you?”

“Because then, if he likes me, and I like him there is that whole dating thing that can happen, and I have to be vulnerable and open myself up and have a chance to end up hurt,” I spill out in one breath. We continue this way: she tells me how ridiculous I am, all the while I make up excuses about why. Inside though, our argument is just a way for me to ignore the pain and fear of intimacy from men in my life, but more importantly, the fear of being loved.

“Mandy,” my friend’s sweet voice calls to me from across the room after a night of our college ministry worship. I can see her bright blue eyes honing in on me, her hands locked together in front of her body as she sways back and forth, and I know what she wants. I walk up to her, again, and let her pull me into the embrace that I know is bound to happen. Hugging can be difficult for me, but with her, I find it easy. Her warm arms hold on to me, and my hands are touching each other. She’s warm and gentle, and like most of my female friends, I feel safe to hug her. She lets go and I back up a bit, putting my invisible steel wall back around me.

I hear my name called out again and this time, it’s another friend. A man who looms over my small five-foot-two frame. I walk up to him and listen as he exclaims how he always loves me being around, about how I bring a smile to his face with my wonderful attitude. He wants a hug, and like my female friend, he is persistent. I force a small smile and as he embraces me, I tense up, pat his back, pull away quickly, and on the inside, I shudder. Even though I know he would never hurt me, he still scares me, just like every other male friend I have.

“Clean your God-damn room!” his voice screeches at me.

“...but Daddy, I don’t want to,” my sobbing continuing to increase, “I just don’t understand why it matters.”

“I don’t care if you don’t want to. You’re gonna do it!”

He stands from his chair, raving.

I stand up straight and simply say, “No.”

His body convulses and his hands clench together as he comes towards me, his anger pulsating heat as I scrunch backwards, getting ready to sprint through the small hallway to my room. He screams profanity at me as he stomps towards the doors. I watch from the side of my bed, huddled and terrified of what I know is coming next. His hands fumble with his belt buckle as he frees it from his waist. He pulls it in half and cracks it together, as if he needs to warm up. I shield the most important parts of my eight-year-old body as the belt comes pelting down on my thigh, once, then twice. All the while, I scream from the pain.

“Okay, okay! I’ll do it, just don’t hurt me.”

He looms over my crumpled form, now writhing on the floor, spit flying out of his mouth, eyes bulging from behind his thick frames, belt still in his hand as he says, “Are you?” He raises the belt over his head.

“Yes!” I scream, trying desperately to get him to calm down, “Yes, I will! Just please don’t hurt me.”

As I start my small attempt to clean the room—sobbing as I try to catch my breath— he leaves, his anger ending. The toys look at me, scattered all around the plush, tan carpet. My bears huddle around, their plastic brown eyes staring into nothing. My dolls lay around the area I just finished playing in. The female Barbie doll, my favorite, Wedding Belle from *The Beauty and the Beast*, sits next to her prince, waiting for me to finish the ceremony. The rest of the room is cluttered with

random dolls, crayons and fake cookware. My tears pour out as I look at the mess, not wanting to clean it up.

Hearing the TV turn up in the room next door, I sit, huddled on the floor, knowing my father will not be back for awhile. I begin to ask the room why I deserve this, how terrible I am, what was it that I did that was so wrong. They were just toys. It was my room. It was not as if he had to live inside my room and my mess. But nevertheless, when he was home from his long trips on the road, it was always the same thing, I was to clean my room.

We were in our old, red minivan heading down one of the more hilly roads of Sioux Falls, and like normal, my dad and I were fighting about something irrelevant.

"You damn kids! I would have never been so disrespectful to my parents growing up!" he screamed from the driver's seat, and continued to go on, calling my sister and I some of the most abhorrent names a person could be called. My sister, Sam, sat silently next to me, and I could see my mom tensing up in the front seat.

I should have kept my mouth shut, but being like him, and a stubborn sixteen-year-old, I screamed back, "if you didn't want kids then why did you have them? You knew the consequences of your actions when you met mom!"

He ignored my comment and continued to scream profanity, every so often turning around to make sure we knew he was mad. Sam looked to the vehicles grey ground, and I became more desperate for him to stop talking.

Already at the point of tears, I replied, "If you didn't want me why did you have me?"

"I wouldn't have if it would have been up to me!" he roared,

"if it would have been up to me you would have been aborted!"

Numbness encompassed me as I heard my mother scream out, "That would have never been an option. Never would I have done that. Never. Don't you ever say that."

It was comforting to hear my mother scream that out, but the damage had already been done. I sat in the back seat, looking out at the passing trees and houses as I let the silent tears make their way warmly down my face, the only outward evidence I let slip from the pain of knowing I am unwanted by the person I long to want me most.

Two years have passed since he left. My regret of not expressing my feelings does not pass. I stare at the screen of my computer, thinking about what a powerful friendship we had. My pen wiggles in my hand as I drift off into various memories we both share. The laughter. It's too painful to describe, and in ways, too personal. I felt a connection, and I still do not know if he felt it too. I try to imagine what it would have been like if I would have told him how I felt, and he would have reciprocated those feelings. I wonder how different things might be, and what our friendship might have become.

"I miss you," I would say over the receiver of my tiny black flip phone.

"I miss you too, Mandy," he would reply, always emphasizing with my name.

"It's weird up here," I would continue, and start summarizing how everyone is doing for a couple minutes.

"I'm sorry," he would say, "you caught me at a really bad time. I have so much homework I cannot even remember my name."

"Oh...just call me when you can." I would stop the saliva

buildup in the middle of my throat, holding back the tears that always came from his distance.

“Okay, I will,” his relief apparent in his voice, “I will see you when I come to Sioux Falls.”

I would hold the phone to my ear for a minute after he hangs up, letting the quite tears fall—making a prickle noise as they hit the surface of my wooden desk.

“Your father, Mandy, is not right in the head,” my mom tells me as she sips her steaming, black-only coffee from across the table.

My almost adult, yet still teenage eyebrows furrow in confusion above my dark plastic glasses and I reply, “What do you mean?”

She sighs, her thin lips form the words, “He never talks about it, but only sometimes gives hints,” she pauses, always trying to protect me.

“Yeah, and...?”

“I think his father abused him, badly,” she finally tells me. I just sit in silence as she continues, “His father was not a good man, and he can’t help it.”

“Oh,” I say, starting to take it in, “well, mom, I met a boy...” I desperately begin, trying to change the subject.

“Really?” her interest peaks.

“Yeah,” I reply, “but Dad won’t like it...”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s from another country.” I say looking down, beginning to go on autopilot as my brain wraps around the shocking news my mother just told me.

I internalize it, take it in, a piece of my Dad’s past I never

knew. By that point, though, it did not matter. My father already bruised me, something I deal with everyday. Maybe my father never received love from his father; did that mean I would not know how to love? Does he love, I wondered as I began to play with the pen I picked up. After all, he did always try to make it better.

“Mandy!” He would call out, “could you please come here.”

At first I would sit in my room, my eyes puffy from all my crying, and would tell him, simply that I did not want to. After a few minutes of coaxing though, I would eventually give in and go out to his chair. I would keep my mouth shut and turn away from him, while he would pull me up on his lap. I always hung my head down in shame, knowing I had done something wrong yet again.

“You know I’m sorry don’t you,” he would say to me, “ya know, if you just cleaned your room instead of fighting with me about it for four hours, it would get done in ten minutes, you would be able to go out and play and I wouldn’t get so mad.”

I would look at him, and sometimes, out of spite, I would argue with him. But eventually I would always give in and forgive him—often giving him a kiss on his scratchy, bearded mouth. And then, leaving his lap, I would walk away, swearing to myself that one day I would be strong.

It was a Sunday and I sat in the middle of Brown hall, my white macbook in my lap. The blue chair, my favorite, was comfortable as I surfed the web, trying to alleviate my boredom after I returned from a long weekend of working in Sioux Falls. Today, the internet seemed to entertain me enough, but secretly I knew why I chose to spend time down

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in the lobby rather than upstairs in my room, and just like clockwork, he showed up, toying with the foosball table.

“Mandy,” I hear my name and I whip around.

“Yeah,” I ask, as I look at his hand holding a foosball out, eyebrows raised in invitation.

It takes me two seconds to jump off my chair and hurry to the other side of the table. He looks up at me, ready to challenge, and quickly halts. He stares at me, and says nothing, his eyes wide.

I look over at him, confused and say, “What?”

“Yo-your hair is very pretty today,” he musters up.

I blush, look down, and reply thanks, the dopey grin beginning to escape from the place I try to keep it hidden, “Thanks...” the only thing I know how to say after a shocking comment. He places the ball into the slot and we begin our fast play of twisting the little fake soccer players and smashing the ball into the goal. It was yet another day of friendly banter and enjoying each other’s company, months before I knew he would leave.

Today is a chilly beginning to a long winter. The wind smacks my face, somehow reaching underneath my bright purple scarf. I am again wrapping myself up tight, trying to evade the wind. My feet move me forward as I try to reach my destination, a warm, welcoming building. The important men in my life flash before my eyes. First my father, with his big glasses and bulbous Italian nose—the outline of his face slaps my memory like the cold. However, a man with curly hair and comforting, chocolate eyes surpasses the harsh images of my father, and yet, his eyes still turn to stone. Somehow, I still face

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the cold, armored by my coat, scarf, hat, gloves, and layers of clothing that try and keep me warm. No matter how much I shield myself, the cold always seeps in like little pebbles hitting my skin. Sometimes, I just want to stay in the cold because it seems much easier than to push forward, seeking the solace of the upcoming sanctuary.

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staring out the window  
 I dream of days past  
 the wind blows snow  
 Across my memories, flash  
 back to a moment's time  
 lying in your arms  
 Charm of your smile  
 made my stomach warm  
 within my chest

your words are what burned  
 back, forth we pushed, shoved, until  
 we broke, came together  
 now I want no more forever  
 no more of this infection

let go of  
 your grip on me  
 get out of my head's memories  
 let me open my eyes, see  
 that day resembles night  
 the snow freezing. Cutting ice

On one side, a steep cliff dropping to the crashing white waves. On the other, a vast green field. My feet pound the pavement of the coastal highway near my home in Northern California, this long run becoming my habit. The sun blazes across the water and on to my skin, heating one side of my face, leaving the other shadowed. The smell of the salt water calms me, helps me focus as I imagine the velvety water rush against my skin. I pass a beautiful butter yellow house with cream shutters and bright late summer flowers hemming in the house and pebble driveway, likely a wife's dream house built by her rich husband. *I should introduce myself and Toby to the neighbors. Maybe they have kids his age...I wonder if they already know who I am?*

The pungent smell of pine reaches my nose as I breathe in, out, in, out in sequence with my footsteps that lead me past the stand of trees that nearly touch the road about a mile from the yellow house. Further down, I pass an eatery where a sign flashing "Fresh Seafood" makes my mouth water, and the smell of cooking steak makes me think of Ben's meat-n-potatoes Minnesota roots. Combine a nice filet mignon with my native California's jumbo shrimp and the thought of a surf-n-turf entrée with iced lemonade and a vinaigrette side salad causes my stomach to rumble, but instead I focus on the thump of my feet against the patched road and push through my moment of temptation.

The cramp in my side reminds me that I have been running for miles; I'm not far from home. Black tire tracks mar the road in the southbound lane, becoming darker as I keep running. I realize I am holding my breath—I have to stop running so I can breathe. I need to stop. *STOP. STOP. STOP!*

I stand gasping in the middle of the grease and oil stains on

the highway, trying to breathe, pacing with my arms above my head, my eyes watering from the pain. *I have to get home.*

I push on, dark tire tracks again smear the road, this time in the northbound lane, until they fade after a hundred feet. A left turn and I am in sight of home; the sun, now at my back, pushing my shadow to the finish line. As I draw closer, I can hear Toby giggling, and I smile to myself as I guess at what antics he and Grandma Jacobs must be up to. Stopping short of the driveway, I watch Toby try to catch the baseball that Grandpa Harper gave him just two months ago, before he and Grandma Harper went back home to Minnesota, as Grandma Jacobs tosses it gently to him in our lawn. Eyes intent, Toby cups his arms as the ball nears and bounces out of his hands. Giggling again, he chases the baseball as the red laces blur in the grass.

"Mommy's home!" Grandma Jacobs announces as she catches sight of me before Toby does.

"Mommy!" Toby shrills as he forgets the ball and runs to meet me.

"Were you a good boy for Grandma?" I pick him up and tickle his sides as he giggles out, "Yes!"

Grandma Jacobs joins us, smiling, "How was your run, honey?"

"Oh, it was nice Mom. Thank you for coming today. I know we agreed on you coming to help on Thursdays, but I really needed to get a breath of fresh air today."

"It's alright, honey. You know I don't mind visiting my Toby anytime," she tickles under his chin, and it's only a hour drive—that's not far. Do you need any help with anything? Do you have dinner ready?"

"I think we'll be fine. I'll probably just make macaroni and

cheese for Toby and a sandwich for me. Besides, I know Dad wouldn't like you driving home when it's dark."

"Well, if you're sure."

I embrace my mom, fighting with my childish desire to let my mom take care of everything for me, "I'm sure. Thanks again. We'll see you Thursday, Mom."

"Later, Grandma," Toby echoes in his warbley four year old voice as he loosens one arm from my neck to wrap around hers, forming a three generation group hug.

I kiss Toby on the cheek as we wave at Grandma's blue car backing out the driveway. Crossing the lawn, climbing the porch steps, and entering into the kitchen through the double wide French doors, I set to work making our supper while Toby plays around the kitchen island, chattering about his day.

"I want a puppy, Mommy."

"I don't think you are old enough for a puppy yet, Sweetie. They are a lot of work—just ask Grandma and Grandpa Jacobs; they have Rex, and I bet that they would let you play with him anytime."

"But I want my own puppy!"

Like the little bubbles tell me that the water for the noodles is about to boil, I can feel a tantrum coming on in the whine of his voice, "Maybe when you're a little older you can have one for your birthday, okay Toby?" I offer in my soothing yet nonnegotiable voice.

"But I want a big black one like the police man has on TV!"

"Toby," I warn.

"And it will have a fluffy tail. And I'll play catch with him with the baseball Grandpa gave me."

"What did I say Toby?"

"And I'll pet him and teach him tricks and name him Ben

just like Daddy!"

Heart clenching, I suddenly can't get enough air. I forget the boiling water and rest the spatula against the rim of the pot. Stepping back, I look at Toby looking at me with his big blue eyes. Grabbing the counter the whole way, I walk to Toby and kneel to his level, "We are not getting a puppy. And even if we got a puppy, you would not name it after Daddy. I don't need one more thing to remind me of how he's not here anymore. Do you understand me?"

His eyes focused on the floor, I catch a glimpse of a tear run down his cheek.

My anger cracks at the realization of what I just said to my son. "Toby, I'm sorry," I try to wrap my arms around him, but he escapes and thuds down the hardwood floored hall to find comfort in his room.

I crouch where he left me for a moment, waiting, when I hear the hiss of water hitting the burner. Racing to the stove, I pull the pot from the heat, flick off the burner, and slam the pot, boiling water and all, into the sink. For the next fifteen minutes, all I can hear through the porch's screen door is Toby's wail intermingled with "Daddy!" Breaking, I drop my head to my arms resting atop my knees and start to cry myself, whispering, "Ben." *If you were here, you would know what to do. Toby would be happy now, and I wouldn't be a horrible mom.* Tears splash on the stair underneath my feet as I let my pity party take control.

Surprising me, my strong, determined side speaks up, *Well, it is only you now Allison. So get your act together and go take care of your son.*

"I know, I know, you're right," and I wipe my tears away



before I walk into Toby's room. He is curled on his bed, holding the baseball Grandpa Harper gave him two months ago—two months ago at Ben's funeral. I walk in and scoop him up in my arms, holding him close to my heart, "Mommy's sorry, Toby. Mommy's sorry." Rocking him back and forth until only his sniffles remain, I ask, "Are you hungry?" I feel his nod against my chest, "Okay, let's go eat."

Even though he can walk on his own, I carry Toby down the hall to the red booster seat at the head of the dinner table. I quickly cut up a pear to keep him occupied and turn on the mini TV across the room, what started as a quick breakfast and morning news tradition for working newlyweds turned into a no-no during family dinner when Toby was old enough for a place at the dinner table. Now the six o'clock cartoons are my standby on days when I don't want to try to fill the silence that was once occupied by stories of our days, plans for the weekend, and Toby's toddler babble and goofy manners.

I start again at the dinner preparations that were forgotten in my outburst. One half-hour show later and I set a bowl of mac 'n' cheese in front of Toby before I claim my usual seat to his left. While he stares at the new cartoon flashing on the TV with wide eyes, one of his few features that are determinably mine, I study his round face and brown hair that are so much like his father's. Even his little button nose resembles Ben's with the defined bridge. His fingers fumbling with the fork are long and slender, opposed to my short fingers. *Oh, you are so much like your Daddy.* The thought almost escapes my lips but falls short when my gaze drifts to the empty chair across from me and freezes until Toby shouts, "Mommy look!" and points to the TV.

At the start of the next cartoon his dinner is gone, and he is

ready to play again. We wash our hands in the kitchen, and the 'towel monster' gobbles Toby's hands dry as he shrieks with joy. Next the Mommy monster chases him through the kitchen, down the hallway past our bedrooms and back, and into the living room before she catches and tickles him. Toby struggles free and dashes to his toy box in the corner where he pulls out his toy train. He leads it around the room under the coffee table and behind the overstuffed chair before yelling, "Make a bridge, Mommy! Make a bridge!" Toby chug-a-chugs around me and between my legs, but his train derails and makes a path straight for my foot.

"Crash!"

"Oh, no! The bridge is going to fall down!" I wobble my legs and whirl my arms before landing with a thud on the floor next to Toby and amidst his giggles.

"Okay, Conductor, it's past your bedtime. Let's race to the bathroom and get those teeth brushed. Ready. Set. GO!"

I let Toby win the race by a hair then monitor as he goes potty and brushes his teeth, a five minute process that he could drag on for an hour if it meant not going to bed.

"Ready Toby?" His navy blue and fire engine red baseball themed bedroom is only a door down from the bathroom. Ben was quite insistent upon the baseball theme when we moved—a tribute to his Minnesota Twins love affair. *I'm so glad I let him talk me into it. Now it's a treasure for Toby.* I help Toby change into his pajamas, fittingly a Twins outfit, and snuggle him into bed, handing him his baseball to hold in his sleep.

"Should we read a story?"

Toby nods with eyelids drooping. I know I won't have to read the whole book, my voice rhyming to Toby's favorite bedtime

story, “Llama llama red pajama weeping, wailing for his mama!” Half way through the story, I close the book and kiss my sleeping son’s forehead then tiptoe to the door and ease it shut behind me.

The sweat left from my run feels grimy on my skin and smells sour in my nose. I head down the hall to my bedroom and attached bathroom. *Time for Mommy’s shower.* The stresses of the day hit me and my guard drops as my sweaty clothes hit the floor in the ‘happy yellow bathroom’ as Ben deemed it when we painted the house right after moving in only one year ago. I can see him, dark hair tousled with flecks of paint in it, standing in his paint splattered cloths, painting stick figures and hearts in sunshine yellow on the white walls. “It’s you and me, Alli. And there’s Toby. Ha! Look, now we’re in our new house!” his eyes sparkle at his silly creativity. Closing my eyes, I breathe in and try to erase my thoughts to nothingness. I crank the heat up as high as it will go and step into the stream, putting my face directly in the water’s path, my tears indistinguishable. Soon I can’t cry any longer, exhausted, so I stand in the scalding water as what feels like a gigantic gaping hole in my chest paralyzes my whole body and let my head drop against the shower wall. *Damn drunk drivers.*

Half an hour and the water is cold. My plush robe provides little comfort as I drop to my bed, too emotionally exhausted to climb under the covers for warmth. I reach for my latest novel on the night stand, hoping to distract myself in a different world.

I’m forty pages into the book and the phone rings, bringing me back from an Egyptian treasure hunt. Annoyed, I wouldn’t answer the phone, but I don’t want the

obnoxious ringing to wake Toby. I glance at the alarm clock, the one on Ben’s side of the bed, on my way to pick up the receiver—9:24. *It must be the parents calling to check in.* “Who else would call so late?”

I mutter aloud.

“Hello?” I don’t try too hard to hide the annoyance in my voice.

“Allison Harper?” the voice questions back.

“Yes. Who is this?”

“I’m Dana Sullivan, your neighbor in the yellow house on the highway.”

“Oh, hi.” *Weird how I was just thinking of calling her.*

“I hope it’s not too late to call, but we have a package addressed to you that accidentally got delivered to our house. I didn’t know if it was important or not, but we are going out of town tomorrow so I thought I’d better check to see if you were expecting something in the mail.”

“Hmmm. That’s interesting—I wasn’t expecting anything. I would happily come over and pick it up, but I just put my son to bed.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about it. I’ll run it over. It’ll only take a minute.”

“Thank you. See you shortly.”

Walking to the front door, I flick on the outside light to illuminate our porch and then wait on the bench in the entryway. I don’t think so much as stare into the space opposite me, but after a few minutes I hear a vehicle approaching and catch sight of light beams illuminating the road to our house. Another minute passes and I open the front door to meet my guest.

“Special Delivery! Here you are!”

“Thank you, Dana.”

“No problem! I hate it when that happens; I mean, how hard it is to keep things sorted! Oh well, it’s a good way to meet the neighbors,” she comments with a smile.

“We’ll have to visit sometime when you get back. It would be nice to get to know the people around here.”

“Yes, dear, we shall!” she agrees, her eyes giving me the ‘you’re the poor widowed mother who needs support’ look.

“Thank you again, Dana. You have a nice trip.”

With a latch of the door and the turn of the lock, I head to the living room to open the box. The return address states that it was sent by Grandma and Grandpa Harper. *I wonder what it could be?* Mind racing to answer my question, I pause and take a deep breath before using a pen from the coffee table to open the box. On top lies a letter written in Ben’s mother’s handwriting:

*Dear Allison,*

*How are you and Toby? Adam and I are thinking of making a trip out soon to visit. We’ll have to keep you posted on the details.*

*We were going through some things we had of Ben’s the other day. We miss him so much and wanted to take time to think about when he was our little boy to when he grew up to be your man.*

*When Ben was little, he wanted to be a policeman more than anything—though he probably told you all about that. His Aunt Barb bought him a stuffed animal for Christmas one year, a black German Shepherd-looking dog like the policemen have, to be exact. He slept with that dog every night it seems, until he was ‘too old’ for that, of course. Well, Adam and I found that dog in the attic with some of Ben’s other*

*belongings and thought little Toby would like it, knowing it was his Daddy’s and all. So here you have it—and we’ll bring the other things along to show you and Toby when we come to visit. First we have to go buy a moth proof plastic tub for it all though! We love you both!*

*Love,  
Grandma Harper*

I have to stop reading several times because the words become too blurry as tears spill from my eyes and down my face. “Oh my goodness! How could she have known?” I manage through my fingers pressed against my lips. “How could she have known?”

With shaking hands, I free the dog from his tissue paper surroundings and hold him to my nose, breathing in the smell of the Harper household and time. Clutching the dog close to my chest, I round the corner from the living room and quietly open Toby’s door. In the light of his baseball hat lamp, Toby’s lashes rest gently against his cheek while his hand still grips the baseball tightly. I imagine he is dreaming about being a great baseball player, throwing perfect pitches and hitting balls out of the park. His peaceful sleep comforts me and I tiptoe to his bed, wanting to hold him close, safe, all night. His eyes flutter open and he nestles up next to me under the covers. “Toby, Mommy has a surprise for you.” His little eyelids flutter again so I urge one more time, “Wake up, sweetie.” His cloudy and confused eyes question me, so I repeat, “Mommy has a surprise for you.” At the word ‘surprise’ I have his full attention. “Grandma Harper sent something very special to you!” I rest the puppy on his tummy, “It’s a puppy just like the kind you want to get! And you know what? This was Daddy’s when he was a little boy like you.

Grandma sent it so that you can have it and remember Daddy.”  
With one hand still clutching the baseball he slowly  
pets the toy.

“Can I name him Ben?” Toby questions.

“Of course, sweetie. You can name him whatever you want.”

His little arm wraps around the dog and hugs it close, and  
I do the same to him, “Oh, Toby. We are going to make it out  
alright, aren’t we? I miss Daddy very, very much, and I bet you  
do too, huh? But you and I have each other now, and we have  
Grandma and Grandpa Jacobs and Grandma and Grandpa  
Harper too. And we will all take care of each other and love  
each other.”

“And Ben too?”

“Yes,” I smile, “and Ben too.”

Kissing his round cheek as his eyes close again, I soon let my  
heavy lids do the same.

I sit on the cold floor;  
a tiny talking bear grins at me.  
A little girl, no more than two, shiny  
light-blonde curls in disarray  
sits next to me, her bright blue eyes  
entranced by the bear’s words.

Its sickening sweet voice calls out  
silly questions:

“What is your favorite color?”

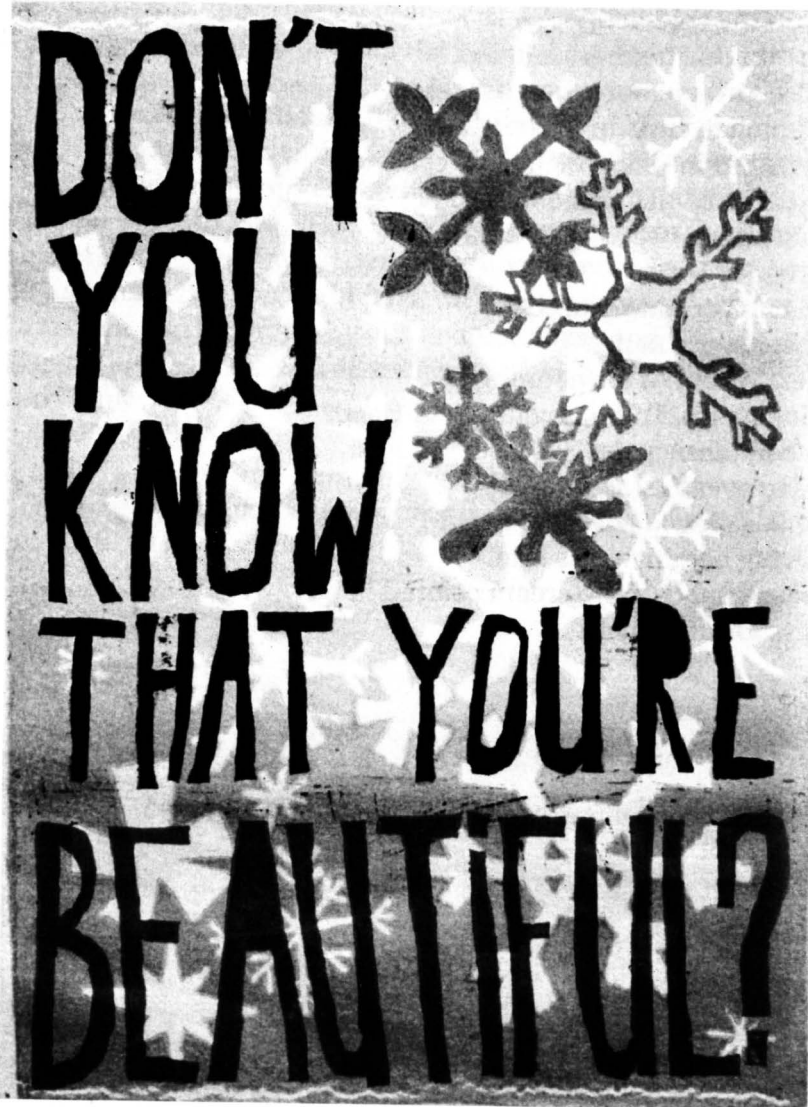
“What is your name?”

I press its fluffy, burnt orange paw  
again, it asks, “Who is your Best Friend?”

The bear anticipates, with curved lips,  
beaded eyes gazing upwards.

I smile as Kayla ponders, I wait  
knowing her answer is him.

Then, a chubby, rosy-cream colored hand  
points towards me.



"We go where, mama, we go where?" Jordan burred from the back seat. Emma smiled.

"Grandpa and Grandma's, honey, for some turkey." Emma looked at the clock; three more hours left. Her eyes darted from the road to the folder of papers waiting to be graded and then back to the road; she sighed. *We'll get there, and then, after some visiting and bed time, I will grade them, I will. If I get three done tonight and five tomorrow, then I can relax on Sunday and correct only two. That will keep me on track to get them back in a week. If only I could correct and drive.*

"We drive fast," Jordan's hazel eyes studied his light-up shoes.

"Huh? Oh, well, little man, it might feel like we are driving *quickly*, but we are going the speed limit, so mama is driving *quickly* because the speed limit tells me to," Emma glanced into the Eddie Bauer baby view mirror aimed directly at Jordan. His thick nose crinkled and reminded her of Greg's. *He looks just like him.*

"Why, mama, why?" He watched the tan and crumpling cornstalks whisk by the window. Emma turned her eyes back to the road, dark tar standing out against the browning grass and litter of red, orange, and yellow leaves.

"Because we are out on the open highway, so we don't have to stop and go all the time," Emma looked questioningly back at him.

"Gobble! Gobble!" Both of Jordan's hands swiped the air, rested above his head for a moment, and fell quietly back into his lap. He smiled, cheeks reaching up to kiss his long eyelashes, "Turkey says gobble."

"Yes, yes. A turkey does say gobble, gobble," Emma exaggerated the noise, watching for her next exit.

Jordan quit yelling and fumbled with the air between his fingers, his feet tha-wumped against his seat in a steady beat. "What is wrong, Mama? You mad at me?"

"Sorry for yelling, little man," Emma voice calm enough to quiet Jordan's hands.

"It's okay, Mama," Jordan smiled. *Some day he won't forgive me so easily.*

Once the *Veggie Tales* theme song was on, Emma joined Jordan in his more than slightly off-key sing-a-long. Her face seemed to glow from a source of light near her eyes. *He has grown up so much in the past six months.* She shook her head, hardly able to remember when his responses consisted of maybe three words or when he could almost keep all of his letters straight, but definitely could not string a sentence together. *Okay, so that's not genius material, but still, at just under three years of age... Amazing, simply amazing what the human mind could do; his dad will be so proud. Greg will be shocked to see all the changes when he finally comes home.*

Emma bit the side of her lower lip and forced her eyes to stay focused on the white dotted line to seize the swelling emotions. *Focus on the road, Emma; you have Greg's strapped in the car seat – don't be careless.* She began to take deep, swelling breaths, her heart rate slowing. She turned the music down. "You know what, bud, tomorrow, when we talk to papa on the computer, we should say the alphabet for him, what do you think? Maybe sing the *Veggie Tales* song?" The slight tininess in her perfectly varied tone pinged off the windshield and jarred her ears. *Come on, voice, let's fake it the best we can. He won't get excited if you don't. Come on, Jordan, say yes.*

"No. I don't want to talk to Papa."

Emma heard the vowels pop and knew Jordan's lower lip was protruding.

"Jordan...why not? Papa loves you and misses you. Why don't you want to talk to him?"

"I mad at him." Jordan squished his eyelids down and began shaking his head.

Emma's eyes remain focused on the road, her face still.

"Why, sweetheart, why?" Her voice maintained a clinical distance. *Just like Atticus Finch said, never ask a question you don't know the answer to.*

"I mad."

"Why?"

"He is far away," his voice dropped to a mere whisper and all fidgeting sounds ceased. *Oh, dear God, please help me explain this to him; please help his heart understand. Please help me understand.*

"Papa doesn't want to be far away, sweetheart. He misses you; you have to know that Jordan. Of all the things in the world, Papa wishes to see you more than anything." *Then why did he, correction, we make this decision?* "I know sweetheart; this is hard, and it's hard for Papa too. He misses you so much. He loves us and wants to be home, but he can't be. He just can't. Where is Papa?"

"Kuwait" came out as one syllable from Jordan's lips.

"That's right. And do you remember why Papa has to be there for so long?" Emma raised her eyebrows, unconsciously holding her breath. *Six months, and six more to go. So long.*

"Because...because..it is his job." The words crawled out of his mouth but slammed into a solid consonant, "Why mama, why is it his job?"

"You know why," *Tone, Emma, tone. That was too hard on*

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him; he's just a little boy," Do you remember? Why is it his job? What does Papa do?" Her tone softened.

"He's a soldier," Jordan's eyes momentarily lit up at that word, and a large grin spread across his face, "My papa's a soldier. Why?"

Emma sighed, trying to infuse new life into a stale answer, "Because, he's a soldier, and his job is to protect people, so he has to go there to help other people. But he's coming home, not for a long time still, but he will come home," Her musical voice landed on and slowly seeped into Jordan's ears. *And what if he doesn't? What if this is the way it is forever and Jordan has to grow up without...EMMA, STOP IT! Get a grip. You can't cry right now; it will only make it worse; focus on what Jordan is saying. Smile.*

"Yeah, and then...and then...when he comes home, Papa drive. And then...And then...he take off his clothes."

Emma's head jerked and her defined cheeks turned red. *What in the world?* Her green eyes leapt with her eyebrows. Her face widened into a grin and she nodded, shrugging her shoulders. The crimson in Emma's cheeks deepened as she remembered the last time Greg was home, his laughter as he quizzed her about random words in the dictionary, their enlivened discussion of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, his hands...Tears welled up in her eyes. *Come on, Emma, crying is pointless – just put your patience on, Emma. Patience. One day at a time; one day at a time.*

"What do you mean, sweetheart?" her voice swirled out, a mixture of tears and laughter.

"He take off his soldier clothes, put on other clothes, and not be a soldier anymore." Emma's stock smile plummeted and met her heart. Her green eyes elongated and transformed into caves. Her lips pinched together, and her throat clamped down.

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*Why doesn't he ever have to deal with this?* Tears threatened again, but these were stinging for a different reason. *Come on, Emma, try to be fair. At least I get these questions, I guess. At least I see his tears. His sadness. His complete confusion and inability to understand this...this...sacrifice for the good of our country" I guess I'll call it. He will never really know what this is doing to Jordan. Never. But I could never, ever do what Greg is doing. Leave my family for a year, miss out on all of Jordan's daily discoveries, oh Greg, you must be in agony, I'll keep mine. At least I feel his hugs, but why, Greg, why? If we didn't do it, other's would, I know Greg, I know – it's for our country, our son – I get all the poppycock. All right, I'm on board. We made this decision together.* Air released from her chest.

"Oh, Jordan," she breathed out again, "Papa will come home and take off his soldier clothes while he is at home, that's right, but he will still be a soldier. He will be a soldier, but at home." *And what about when his guard unit deploys again, what about then? In four or five years when there is another child to be torn apart by your absence? What then? Me with two of them to console? Emma wiped her sweaty palms on deeply-dyed jeans and clutched the steering wheel,* "Do you understand, Jordan?"

"Yeah," he sighed.

"Okay, what did I say?"

"I don't know," Jordan smiled, eyes turning into half-moons. Emma re-explained, and the two reinvented the conversation a few times before Jordan finally regurgitated, "Papa come home and be a soldier," the sparkling smile refilled his face only to fall and push itself out, "Not for long time, though, not for long time. He will come home in a blue airplane, not yet. We have to wait."

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“That’s right sweetheart, and sure, he’ll come home on a blue plane,” *He did leave on one – I’m surprised you still remember that, little man. Children are amazing.* Emma’s grip on the steering wheel relaxed, and she settled her back against the seat again.

Jordan stared at the black and white cows standing in the mud and filling the air with a pungent smell, “Mama?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Chocolate is my favorite. I hungry,” Jordan’s eyes opened wide, and his mouth crafted a perfect smile.

“We are not having any more candy today, sir. You may have some water, if you would like,” Emma’s voice landed evenly, deeper than usual.

“I want candy.”

“Nope, just water until we stop for lunch in a couple of hours.”

“No. Chocolate.”

Emma ignored him.

Jordan tensed his body, bending his arms and balling up his fists. His entire body began quaking as though he were revving up for an explosion. He began swinging his legs faster and faster. “Nonononononononononononono! I want CANDY right NOW!”

Emma raised her eyebrows and looked in the rearview mirror, her mouth in a straight line. “Get a hold of yourself young man. Stop it.”

“CHOCOLATE!”

Emma gritted her teeth and ignored the next two minutes of screaming until Jordan, wiping tears from his eyes, sighed, nestled his head slightly against the car seat, and closed his eyes.

“Much better, little man.”

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Emma deflated slightly, shoulders slumping forward, and turned up the volume. Selecting a John Mayer album, she allowed her brow to furrow and her mouth slacken, but she stayed focused on the road ahead.



66  
Teacher said the rat's heart can still beat  
Hours after it's been killed.  
Where pins were pulling back skin  
And flesh wounds went deeper but  
Couldn't stop what's keeping us breathing.

I only got so close before I realized what was happening.  
Blood was still pumping, veins still moving.  
Red couldn't be brighter and  
Underneath fur there's still translucent skin.  
Like grandpa telling stories and finding old letters  
Bare and open in trunks- in caskets  
Closed, coming home from wars nobody wanted.  
She said I could handle this,  
She said nobody really goes pale,  
She said we'll call the nurse when we need to.  
But she had to hold me, control me.  
I wish the warmth she gave  
Would bring life to the heartless.  
See, without the blood on war stories  
Grandchildren wouldn't know the truth of histories-  
Beyond borders, beyond countries  
Lay dead- but- still- beating- hearts  
Of men in uniforms.

Teacher had to keep me still  
Before I could breathe again,  
Be calm again.  
And I couldn't understand  
Why it was so quiet in the classroom.  
They watched.  
Littered in the old streets are  
People who still remember it all,  
the news of helicopters, black skies.

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And bombs exploding between seconds,  
Like watching all the fighting;  
They knew my instability by the paleness of my skin  
And the shaking of my voice;  
Trying to speak,  
Trying to heal what my hands can't touch.  
Like the smell of blood before you knew it was there,  
Like the plastic that kept  
Red-burgundy from our white shirts.  
Like it was alright that  
On the pristine counters lay  
Dead-but-still-beating-hearts.  
She said I could handle this.  
I want to tell her that these nightmares  
Can't be covered by towels,  
Can't be thrown away to make it go away.

And I know,  
These hearts will stop beating soon.  
And by teaching dissection I learned  
Vulnerability like it meant something.  
Like flying over fields of dead bodies-  
Grandpa remembered the prayers- no bodies,  
He tried to send to heaven to ask for forgiveness,  
For less lifelessness.

Like now:  
Breathing deeply and recovering  
But what was behind me was still there.  
I'm not old enough to see open bodies,  
To know bombs across borders,  
And at eighteen I wasn't ready  
To hear their hearts pump so loudly.

68

It's been fourteen years since I last heard the sound of her voice, but there was a time when the two of us were inseparable. We'd spend warm summer days, towing large green pails and fine-mesh nets around our adjoining backyards, eagerly hunting butterflies to catch. She was always the better hunter. Faster than I, she'd run ahead of me, chasing the irregular flight of black and crimson monarchs—circling our lawns in a chaotic dance with these elusive insects.

If it wasn't this, it was always something else. Swings. Sandboxes. Picking dandelions and wild flowers for our mothers. Dogs. Ice cream. Cartoons. Climbing trees. Telling stories. Playing school. Bike rides. Lemonade stands. Picnics. Basketball. Running. Ghost hunting. Boxcar children. Plucked raspberries and snatched chocolates. And always the run to avoid the calling voice, telling us it was time to come home; the two of us trying to squeeze three more minutes out of each day before we were separated.

I knew her then like my own hand. I could tell you her favorite color and food, what she liked to wear, which school subjects she hated, or why she loved the smell of the rain. I could tell you where she got that white scar above her left brow, or why she was always afraid of her older brother.

The first time I met Caitlin Roswell was one of those moments that forever changes a boy. It was toward the end of a clear April day, and the wind had finally stopped heaving its breath through the old sycamore trees in our backyard. My older brother Mike, having finally come home from his soccer practice, was walking beside me as we headed to an open field behind our house carrying a medium-sized football under his right arm.

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As we walked along an old dirt path that took us to this field, the smell of spring became more apparent with the scent of lavender and wet underbrush. The small buds of flowers were beginning to erupt out of their shells, and the old trees showed signs of green on their wooden arms. With the sun in the eastern horizon, I blindly looked up at my older brother with the excitement that comes to a child from an original idea:

"How about this time, I get to be Troy Aikman, and you get to be Joe Montana," I said.

"We don't have to pretend every time we play football, Jared. Sometimes we can just throw the football around you know?"

"I know, but it's funner when I'm Troy Aikman. How long are we gonna play? For a while?"

"I don't know. We'll just have to see how much longer until it's dark."

"Hey Billy, you come out play football with us?" I yelled.

Up ahead of us one of the kids on the block, Billy Flemming, was already perched on our football field. He had thick red hair and skin that was always more pink than it was white. Mike and I had been new to the neighborhood, and Billy was the first kid that the two of us had befriended. At first I hadn't liked him because he always smelt like old clothes and ashes, but by this time, Billy had become a regular part of both mine and Mike's lives.

I don't remember how much time had elapsed before I noticed her. I remember throwing the football back and forth between the three of us—often lining up and running routes with one player throwing, one catching, and the last one defending—and all the while we did our best to imitate our heroes we watched every Sunday. We'd bump chests, spike

footballs, slap hands and asses, slide in the grass, and celebrate catches with high-stepping struts or choreographed dances.

It was in the middle of one of these performances, at least my memory has painted it this way, that I first caught a glimpse of Caitlin. She was wandering the periphery of the field, with a large yellow pail in her hand, and seemingly running with no intention or purpose other than to catch the wind.

I was young, only ten years old, but I remember the sudden body-blow of seeing her running like a wild animal. Yes, I was ten years old, but I was certain the sight of this girl held more magic than any of my previous boyhood dreams.

On the first day I met her, she was more of a presence than an individual—I didn't want to stare too long and have her see my eyes fixated on her. But in the days that would soon pass, I would memorize what she looked like: long, dirty-blond hair that was always up in a pony tail or else snarled and knotted together, skin tanned from always being outdoors, large brown eyes and a face full of sharp points.

I'm not sure if Mike and Billy noticed her as well, but I did notice that we all suddenly started running much faster, when the other caught a ball we'd tackle even harder, and the end zone dances suddenly became more embellished and creative. And suddenly, by accident of course, we talked much louder.

"Girls don't play football, right Mike" I called to my brother as I set up in my stance.

"That's right. They're the cheerleaders. Now get ready! Set...hike!"

I ran a post route to the corner of the field, pushing past Billy and looking over my right shoulder for the spiraling brown ball. Mike's pass was right on target, but I had little time to set

my eyes, and the ball hit my hands, bounced off my chest, and fell to the grass.

*No! Why couldn't I catch the stupid pass—I had it...*

I quickly glanced over and saw that the girl had ventured closer to us and had seen the play.

"Wait until I'm looking. I wasn't even ready," I said.

Surprisingly, instead of defending his pass in his usual manner, Mike simply smiled at me and nodded his head in agreement. He was three years older than me, and seemed to know more about what was going on than I did at the time.

We lined up again, and I can still remember the adrenaline punching through my veins and heart as I tried to correct my last mistake. As I waited for the call, my tongue had turned to drywall, I could taste the blood from me biting my tongue, and I could feel the pounding of my pulse in my back teeth.

This time I was going to run a quick cross over—a route where I was more likely to catch the ball. When Mike said "hike," I took off and drove at Billy like a sprinting bull, then planted my right foot, and crossed my body over his and ran directly left. As I watched the ball sail through the air, I imagined thousand of eager eyes waiting to watch me make the play, until I finally had both my hands gripping the football firmly and snug against my chest.

With all the strength that a ten-year-old body can conjure, I ran for the sideline and turned up field, barely missing the outstretched arms of my defender, and ran the ball into our make-believe touchdown.

"Nice one Jared! You burned him!" screamed my brother from across the field. And at that very moment, I was certain I had just accomplished something that history books would tell of.

Again, I looked over to the stranger, and once again her glance pierced me, and I smiled.

*Crap. I just smiled. Football players don't smile.*

I ran back and celebrated with Mike, and I was certain I'd be happy forever.

It had been several months since I first met Caitlin, and she had grown from phantom figure of the football field into my best friend. We spent nearly the entire summer together—from the time it was warm enough to venture outside, to the late waning lights of prairie days. There was one day in particular that I can still remember with the kind of clarity that memory so rarely retains in the folds of time. It was nearing the end of the day, and the two of us were swinging.

"Jared! Look, we're married."

I looked over to see our swings lurching forwards and backwards in perfect unison. Immediately, I began to thrust my legs upwards as I titled my away from the swing.

"Looks like I'm going to have to get higher," I said as I smiled at Caitlin.

As my swing climbed higher, the colors of green and red and orange and blue started to swirl and envelope me; sounds of air pushed into my ears, and my brain lost its equilibrium. It was a thrill, to feel that at any moment, one might be thrown off from the chaos; it was a thrill, the dual desires to stay planted in the folds of the swing and to be projected away from the earth. The thrill was no longer controlling your senses, and no longer wanting control.

"Jared, it's time to come in. We're going to watch a movie together."

"Ok Mom. Just a minute."

The sound of my mother's voice had compelled me out of

the singular rush of swinging without control and forced me to come back to the world. I glanced over to see if Caitlin had heard my mother's call, and I could tell from the pace she was now going that she had. The two of us stopped pumping our legs and let the swings come to a natural stop—anything to prolong our goodbye.

For a few moments the two of us dangled there, suspended by the linked yellow chains, until Caitlin broke the silence. "I really don't want school to start. Tommy Riley is going to be mean again."

I looked at her face, softened from a recollection upon her. "You want me to say something to him?"

"What? You don't even know Tommy, do you?"

"No, but I know he's mean to you, and—"

"So what would you do about it, huh? Beat him up?"

Caitlin laughed at her own joke (much like I am now, I was little for my size and avoided almost all confrontation). I could feel the blood rush to my face and my head swirled from the sudden heat.

"No. I never said that, that I'd beat him up, did I? I just mean if you wanted back up or something, or...I don't know."

At this point our swings had come to a standpoint, and without an inkling of what to say next, I got off the swing and began to move in the direction of my house. Caitlin followed me shortly behind.

"Jared, I was just teasin'. You're not mad are you?"

"No, I'm not mad. My mom just called and I don't her to yell again."

I stopped just short of the river rocks that surrounded my house, and turned around to face Caitlin before I went towards the back door.

“And also, I don’t like what he said to you last year. So I don’t know him, but I know he was mean to you. That’s why...I, that’s why I don’t like him, ok?”

Caitlin pointed her brown eyes at me that I knew so well, and as she looked at me, a serious expression suddenly took over her face, and she stepped even closer.

She leaned to the left of my face, and as soft as trees whisper in the night, she kissed my cheek.

“Thank you,” she said.

It was the first time a girl had ever kissed me.

“Caitlin Roswell, originally from the Watertown area, died Saturday from injuries sustained in an automobile accident. She was best known in her hometown as the local star of the women’s track team...”

I look down at the printed words in front of me, and the crumpled newspaper under my clenched finger tips disappears into the counter top, and at this very moment, I forget all that surrounds me.

I am twenty-six years old now, and I can’t even remember the last time I saw Caitlin—the girl who once filled my summers, and now I know I’ll never see her again. We had been inseparable for three years, and I knew her and touched her and ran with her and loved her, and now she’s gone.

It wasn’t that we couldn’t stay in touch. I had moved to another house, and we were no longer neighbors. Although we’d get together on occasion for several years after, we eventually grew up, went to different schools, made new friends, and lost contact. I’d run into her time from time, at the supermarket or at a local basketball game, but for some reason, enough time had passed that we grew out of each other’s life.

I always thought that I should talk to her again, see who she had become, how she was. In fact, I almost did once. But now she’s gone.

*What happened to you?*

I stand up from the table in front of me and cross the linoleum floor to look out at the large bay window facing my back door. It’s a clear November sky, and the season’s first snowfall has colored the landscape in a blanket of white, enclosing the whole land to a fog of cold that will penetrate all matter for the next four months. Suddenly, I become dizzy and need to place my hand out against the wall in front of me. She’s gone.

Is it supposed to feel like this—a train wreck, a side-blow from across the field, a jolt you forgot you could feel? And all I can think of was that she was real; she wasn’t a character in a book or a movie, but someone I had known so well and forgot to remember.

I don’t even know what she was like anymore. I’m twenty-six years old now, and the ten-year-old girl might not be the picture in the newspaper, but I recognize the same solemn eyes and childlike smile, and now she is gone.

We had chased our gilded butterflies—chased them through meadows and trees and brush and dirt and gardens and yards and days and days of youthful play. My first memories of summer are her, and the hours spent running in our adjoining backyards, darting in and out of toy sheds, and jumping off swings as if we were birds, free to fly from the confines of reality, beyond the great dome of heaven—these were the hours I remember best. She was beautiful.

And now she’s gone.

# Purple Echinacea in Fenceline

Jordan Purintun

Oakwood, Vol. 3, Iss. 4 [2010], Art. 1

Perennial

Jessica Slama

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Bleeding Hearts return-  
Little hearts twined with memories-  
Grass-green feet thud and snap twigs,  
Lamps peer from behind the bush.  
Captive robber lights, my eyes

Bleeding Hearts return,  
Squirt-gun fights splash pink-white  
Buds with memories: saving cats,  
Screams, piercing yowls beneath  
My bleeding heart, brothers  
Acting veterinarians

Bleeding Hearts return,  
Trips and laughter-  
Peals, Halloween night  
Ghost tumbles from un-won bush battle,  
Ninja and black cat save brother-  
Ghost, scattered with green scars,  
Out hunting treats, treasures

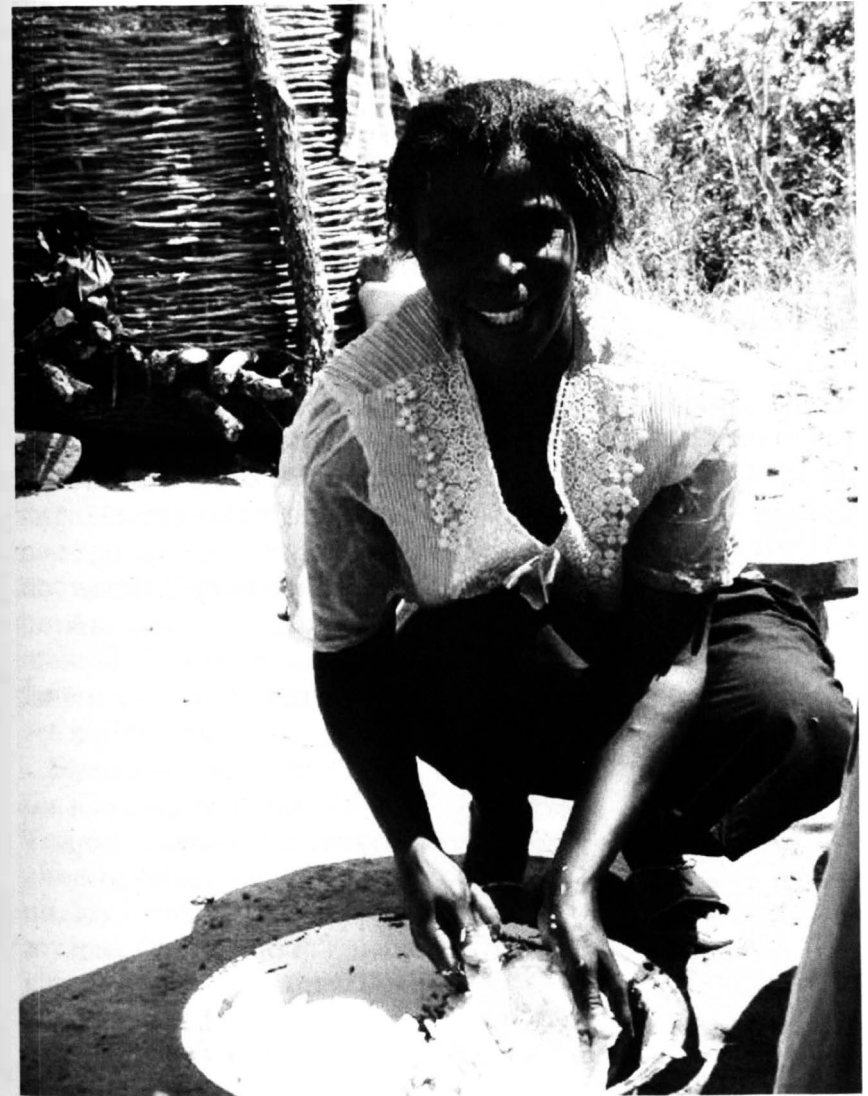
Bleeding Hearts return,  
Dirt sprays buds and leaves  
Digging the new home for dear Sassy cat,  
My bodyguards, comforts, brothers,  
Carry my weight

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Bleeding Hearts return,  
Faux-clever moves round swaying flowers and  
Checkered board, deep thoughts echoed by  
Dreams, painted on pink hearts,  
Shattered by Queen down, covered in dirt  
Set up by smirking imp, brother

Bleeding Hearts return,  
Pink-white blooms blossom with  
Flowing, stolen memories,  
From my bleeding heart.

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While we were standing outside, my mother pulled on the sleeve of my white coat, pulling me into a loose hug. She quietly asked me to go upstairs *for her* and thank my step-father for the tank of gas and “such a wonderful weekend”. Even as the words left her mouth, I wanted to vomit. Instead, I headed back inside our home, ascended the stairs, and stopped at the border between the kitchen tile and the beige living room carpet. My step-father was sitting in the chair, watching T.V. while wearing his orange sweater. I still had my shoes on, and I asked him if I could get a goodbye hug. He didn’t budge. Sucking in a deep breath that expanded my lungs, I walked over to his chair and said my lines. I bent down and hugged his frame, hugged a living statue. His eyes never looked away from the T.V., and his mouth remained silent. Whisking around on my heels, I went back downstairs and came back to Brookings.

I can’t say I was surprised by the turn of events, although I always hope for something better each time I head home. While in high school, I felt like I was trapped in a poisonous relationship with my verbally and emotionally abusive step-father, but I silently endured it for my mother. I don’t go home often; I no longer have to put myself into a situation I don’t want to be in. I go home for my mother, out of love, because I know she misses me. Secretly, I had hoped the presence of Kelsey and Heather—two of my college friends—would keep my step-father in a great mood; he’s always happier when other people are around.

It was my fault that we were studying at the dining room table in my family’s split-level home. I wanted to study at the oak dining room table so we could talk with my mother as she cooked dinner, to hear her tell Heather to “add more flour to the gravy; it’ll thicken it,” sitting nearly close enough to hear

the chicken snap and crackle in the frying pan. I knew better; we should have been in the cold downstairs, silently studying, disconnected from the rest of the house in self-exile.

Instead, I tried to cram in one more minute of studying for the test I was stressing over. My bad example somehow caused Kelsey to say “there’s still room at your end of the table...” as my step-father approached the table with a heaping plate of mashed potatoes, peas, and fried chicken.

“I said get your damn books off the table!” my step-father roared, blood rushing through his face, up across his forehead, and over his balding hairline. Striking fear into my core, he slammed his plate down on the table top for emphasis.

Immediately, I responded like a robot, numbly packing up my books and serving myself supper. I ate so fast that I didn’t taste the chicken my mother made because it’s my favorite. I had to get away from the table to calm down. Not only did I not want to cry so I wouldn’t have to acknowledge the pain, but I also didn’t want to cry in front of Heather and Kelsey and make the situation worse. I knew I shouldn’t cry before leaving for the care center, where we were going after dinner to visit to see my grandma.

Slamming the car door, I cursed under my breath, started the Chevy Blazer, and slowly pulled out of our dirt driveway. The cool autumn air had my teeth chattering, and the sky was already dark enough to make my automatic headlights switch on. My hands shook on the steering wheel as we drove towards my grandmother’s care center. Desperately trying to make the situation better for my friends, I blamed myself for my step-father’s insensitive, sharp remark during dinner.

*All your fault, all your fault*—words burnt into my ears, searing themselves into my mind even as I rambled other



excuses to my passengers as my foot pressed down on the accelerator, willing the car towards our destination. By the time I reached the care center, putting my car into park, I was babbling about how I should have been better- somehow. I'm always supposed to be better somehow. I crumbled as tears started coming out of my eyes, like water breaking out of a dam. I desperately tried to stop them, muttering "I can't do this right now...." as I climbed out of my car and struggled to get the seat belt off my body.

My parents would arrive soon, following closely behind us in another car. Kelsey and Heather, deeply concerned, tried to pull me into a hug, but I dodged them to get to the care center's rest room as fast as I could. Once inside the bathroom, I started sobbing to my friends.

Kelsey reached out to me, placing her palm on my shoulder, and said "It's *fine*." She soothingly continued, trying to bring me back to a more stable condition, "Everything is fine."

"No, no it's not." My shoulders started shaking, and the tears started coming out harder, with the addition of my running nose. My lungs were heaving, burning, but the muscle of my heart—deep inside my body— felt like it was being ripped across the sides of my rib cage. "Dear God, this happens every time. Every single time. Oh God. I have to stop this! My mother can't see this."

And she can't see. My mother can't see how my step-father's actions hurt me. She can't see that every time he verbally beats me down, I feel like she's letting him stab a metal fork through my sternum, busting through the bone to my heart as she inactively stands in the background. She doesn't see how abusive he is, and that the length of time between his blow-ups, when everything is ok, grows shorter every time.

I know that at the end of the weekend I will be able to leave, but she has to continue to live with my step-father, and she takes his side because she wants her second marriage to be *happy*. Mostly, I am afraid that if she sees me cry, she will look into my eyes and see the secret desire locked-up inside of me—that I just wish she would divorce him.

I looked in the mirror mounted on the wall, seeing Heather's face reflected back to me while she stood behind my shoulder, completely dumb-stuck and unsure what to say.

Kelsey continued softly "Just cry." Grabbing my frame, she simply held me.

Once I let go, I cried until I knew I was ready to start putting on the mask. I could breathe again. I let go, walked over to the sink, splashed cold water on my face. I pulled some cheap, brown paper towels out of the metal paper towel dispenser. I dabbed at my face because rubbing makes your face redder. I pulled one more breath into my lungs, twisted the door knob in my hand, pulled the door open, and stepped out into the hallway to wait for my mother—my face ready to see her.

Almost two weeks after the incident, I spoke with my mother on the phone. The frustration still vibrated in her voice as she told me "I was so ashamed of him I could have just spit. You don't act that way in front of guests. So uncalled for—when you left I went downstairs and just cried. I could've made it all better- walked over to you girls, put my arms around your shoulders, joked it up, telling you to put your books away. Didn't talk to him for almost a week, 'til he felt like an ass, and damn it, he should. I want you to know that, that I see it too." I heard her sigh. "Anyway, the other night, he said he felt embarrassed over his behavior, but it's not like he's going to

see those girls again.” I could feel my body dryly chuckle as I listened to my mother drone on.

This last weekend my mother came to Brookings to visit me. While we were out at a restaurant eating dinner, she brought up the conversation of my step-father. Already, I had internalized the pain and stuffed it inside myself, and instead of wanting to bash my step-father, I watched my mother. She sat against the back of a mahogany bench wearing a navy blue sweater. As she was shoving crinkle fries in her mouth, her gray-blue eyes were sparkling with light bouncing of the icy specks. She was a vision. Seeing my hesitation to talk about my step-father, she turned the conversation to health.

“...my blood test turned out horrible. Dr. Reid chewed my butt out and told me to lay off the carbs. Carbs are causing my bad cholesterol, and my blood sugar levels are borderline diabetic. This is so important because diabetes runs in our family. Did you know a really easy dinner to make is to marinate a chicken breast? And then you can grill it on the George-Forman, put it over some dirty rice, cover it with a piece of cheese and some mushrooms.... I try to keep up on these things because I know you need me here.”

As I listen to my mother’s voice, my mind wandered. I see myself sitting at the oak table in the dining room, patiently waiting for dinner to start. I’m not hungry because it is four o’clock in the afternoon, and it’s too early in my opinion to start Thanksgiving dinner, but my step-father wants to eat at this time. My mother has already brought the turkey, stuffing, and green beans over to the table. She adds salt and pepper into a bowl of mashed potatoes, and as I look past her, I see a blueberry pie cooling on the kitchen counter.

My mother calls my step-father to dinner, but he doesn’t come right away. Inside, I can feel my heart sinking. He is taking too long; something isn’t going right.

I hear his steps coming up the stairs towards the kitchen, hard and solemn. As he enters the dining room, his face is already red, and my breath catches on its way into my lungs. My step dad’s eyes narrow in on me, cursing me every which way for losing a calculator that I have never touched; all the while, insults fly out of his mouth. I want to clamp my mouth shut and keep it that way, except I see my mother standing behind him, her mouth down turned, saying absolutely nothing. She is letting me take his assault. I imagine that an invisible bungee cord inside my body snaps, and this time, I stand up. Running through the house, I grab my keys and leave for Brookings, back to Kelsey who wraps me up into a hug and lets me cry.

However, I know I am still sitting in the booth at the restaurant while my mother talks, running my index finger over the brown and tan geometric patterns of the fabric covering the seat. And all the while, I know my step-father is hundreds of miles away.

All I know is silence. I know what the sun in the sky looks like. I thought once that I could actually see light, not just rays of sunshine, but actually see what the light was made of, the energy flowing in tiny waves. I saw it vibrate, and I could feel it waving on my skin; it tickled, and I laughed. This is why I like to stand outside in the mornings, before anybody else is awake, and watch the dawn bloom on the horizon. It feels like watching life begin, like watching baby chicks stumble around, gaping at everything. It's new, untainted. In the morning, there aren't things that might hurt you. Those things are still sleeping. The dawn makes everything so visible. I can be anywhere, hide anywhere, and mother and father won't get into fights because of me anymore. Because I can lie down and hide in the light. It would surround me, and I would blend in with everything else.

Even though I can't hear, I know how it works. How sound waves make the eardrum vibrate, and then the signal is transferred to the cochlea by the malleus, incus, and stapes. I know how to use my hands and my eyes—my skin—to feel the life vibrating around objects. Sometimes I stand in place with my nose pressed against the bark of a tree, and I study the edge of the bark against the line of the background. I stay in that position, sometimes for hours, until I see the slightest, tiniest vibration. My father tells me that it's just my imagination, but I think it's the movement of live molecules, dancing and whirling around one another. Father doesn't understand. He gets frustrated with me.

He told me once that hearing is like a feeling or an image you get in your head that someone else puts there, and he tried to describe it to me by placing my fingers inside the shiny metal

bell of his trombone while he played. Then he asked me what kind of things showed up in my head. Mother tries to show me by putting my fingers on her lips when she says "I love you." I can feel the muscles contract at the edge of her lips, the tiny wrinkles at the corners, and the fine, moist vibration, but it doesn't mean that I can hear, and nothing shows up in my head. She gets frustrated when I tell her that I don't know what she's saying. She says it's important that I know. She says that because she feels sorry when she and Father fight. "It's not your fault" she says. I know it is though.

Father's in the orchestra that plays in the surrounding towns and at the junior college, and mother teaches junior high band. They're disappointed in me, but they don't know that I know that. They try to hide it, but I can tell. Sometimes they argue. When they do that, my dad leaves the house and I don't see him the rest of the night. When he comes home the next morning, his hair is sticking up and his tie and collar are loose. He carries a brown paper bag. Nobody says anything.

I don't go to their concerts anymore. I hate the introductions at the after-parties, the handshakes and all the adults with the fake smiles, the apologies and blushing from the parents that don't know that the bandmaster's son is deaf. I just don't go anymore. I don't like to see my parents stand there with mother's hand on my shoulder, nodding their heads. "Don't worry about it" they tell the other parents. "It's no problem."

I refused to sign for a long time. Until I was 8. People think there's something wrong with someone when they can't hear, when they have to wave around their arms and fingers to speak. There's nothing wrong with me; I just live in

a different world. Even the word “silence” puts me in a bad mood. When I learned that word, “silence,” I refused to sign it back to my ASL teacher. Begin with your index fingers crossing in front of your mouth, like an “X,” and then push your arms and hands away from you, palms out, like you’re trying to push your way through a huge spider web. It means, “I can’t do this. I’m not normal, and there is something wrong with me.” But there’s nothing wrong with me. I like it here, my world. Nothing’s wrong. Everything is fine. We’ll be ok. That’s what mother says. We’ll be ok.

Spiders. I have a pet *Avicularia Avicularia*. A tarantula. A Common Pink Toe, 9.6 centimeters long. Mother hates him. I named him Hawking, after my favorite scientist. My favorite is *Haplopelma Lividum* because they’re bright blue, almost neon. Someday I’ll get one. I like them because they can’t talk (though some can make barking noises), they are intelligent, and they can hide almost anywhere. When I first got Hawking, I couldn’t find him when I looked in his terrarium; I didn’t know yet how to spot him. I kept thinking that he somehow got out, and I would run and get Father and Mother. Mother would grab her keys and go sit in our van outside and Father would put on his work gloves and get the vacuum cleaner and put the long nozzle on it. But, after a few times, I learned that to spot a tarantula; you had to memorize the placement of all the other objects in the terrarium, and sort of cross your eyes to make them kind of blurry and kind of focused at the same time and see what stuck out. Sometimes Hawking would be sitting right in the middle of the pebbled area, and we still couldn’t see him. I wish I could hide like that, where no one could find me. Where I wouldn’t be bothered. Hawking and I could live there together and play hiding games.

I wanted to be in the band with the other children even though I couldn’t hear. When I was young, mother would bring me on her hip to her class, and I would laugh and laugh at all the shiny bright tubas, flutes, French horns, and oboes going up and down, up and down, and the kids red faces staring, focused, blowing with cheeks all puffy. And the drums. The drums were the most exciting, and I liked to sit next to the big timpani and close my eyes, feeling the deep vibrations come up through my legs and torso and come out my lips. I would watch mother at the piano, her eyes laughing all the time as she pounded away and pointed at different groups of children, telling them whatever it was she told them. I wish I could go back there, and watch mother laugh. I want to see her laugh again.

But Mother and Father said a deaf child shouldn’t be in band, so they signed me up for sports instead. I was good at soccer when I paid attention, but usually I would find myself day dreaming. One time I woke from a day dream to see a line of my teammates, mouths opening and throats glistening, screaming at me as the opposing team took a penalty kick. I watched the ball fly into the net. I didn’t even know what was happening until it was too late. I was probably thinking about Hawking, or *Haplopelma Lividum*, or how Mother was making vanilla custard for dessert tonight. I make everyone so angry. I quit soccer.

I felt that way another time. I had just returned home from school, stepping from the bus full of the children who pinched the back of my arms when I started out the window too long, and I pushed open the heavy wooden door to our house. I set down my bag and stepped onto the cool linoleum of the kitchen. No one was there. Mother always waits for me in

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the kitchen with an after-school snack. I went to my parent's bedroom and pushed open the door. The bed was made, the air was cool. Empty. I walked down the hallway to the living room, and there she was. Mother was crumpled on the floor, shaking. She looked up and her eyes were crying, and there was a large red mark on her face, and the skin around her eye looked like she had painted it black with makeup. She just looked at me, crumpled there on the ground. I stood and stared. Then she looked past me and her eyes widened. I turned around, and there was Father. His eyes were crying too. His face was red, but there wasn't a mark around his eye like there was around Mother's. I could see his arms shaking, and he started speaking to Mother. He began pacing back and forth and throwing his hands in the air. My mother stayed on the ground. Father pointed at me, and kept talking and walking back and forth. Then he knelt down on one knee and held his arms out to me, like he wanted to hug me. I stared. I felt a hand on my shoulder, and looked up and it was Mother. We walked past father, who was still on his knee holding out his arms, to the front door, where she grabbed my bag from the ground. We went outside to the driveway, where the green van was parked. Mother opened the door for me and I crawled in, and she got into the driver's seat. I signed to her that I wanted to get Hawking, but she had already started driving. She didn't say anything. Her face was blank except for the angry red mark on it.

Sometimes I wish I was like Hawking. Then I could live in the world where I belong. I could blend in and hide anywhere, and no one would find me, no one would notice me. Sometimes when I'm coming home from school on the bus, I look up out the window. I wonder what the sky looks like from way up there, when you're closer to it.

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Gravel grinds under my toes, tears  
 carve dirty streams down my cheeks.  
 Grandpa towers over me, eyeing  
 smudges from his tool shed visible  
 on my hands. I cram them into pockets.  
 His scowl cuts as easily as the gleaming  
 table saw behind him.  
 Beyond the wrinkled anger,  
 his compassion still loves the sinner.  
 Wrapping my arms around his blue coveralled leg,  
 I searched deep pools of forgiveness.  
 A wave of cigars and grease  
 enfold me; the cologne he alone wears.  
 His mechanic's thumb lightly brushes away the tears,  
 "Wash up before supper," he reminds.

"You're Toast" -A phrase used by Canadians to indicate that  
 the person addressed is in deep trouble.

If I am toast, then let me be sweet spread  
 thick with lotion butter born of milk that flowed  
 from velvet udders. A dream cream flushing  
 the cheeks of a virgin milkmaid--churning the kind of butter  
 a baby climbs the cupboard for. Reach in the cabinet  
 to grab a thick salty fistful from the stick. Feel-your-  
 body-melt-in-the-crumbs-with-it butter, covered  
 in the juices of the queen bee's lover  
 who sipped his nectar from ripe  
 clover buds purpling April prairies, or dark  
 syrup smuggled from Abu Dhabi's buried hives.  
 Amber candy you drizzle on the crust. Lick  
 Van Morrison's lyrics dripping slow from the lips  
 of your sweet one and whisper his name; honey,  
 heat up the griddle, call me French  
 and dip me deep till I'm drenched in the batter  
 of yolks broken from ivory eggs stolen  
 while mama hen looked long and hard at the highway.  
 Yolks so bright your spoon begins to orbit  
 them like suns and you are just a star in their galaxy,  
 or wax me with peanut butter. Forget  
 George Washington Carver, I mean nut batter  
 mashed by the Aztecs on island Texcoco.  
 Their native tongues praising peanut nourishment  
 for nimble bodies as they roasted alongside the  
 brown legumes--bent before their hot God in the sky--

then smear my sides with strawberry rhubarb jam;  
succulent berry juice boiled to a mad froth  
on the farm wife's stove top before she cooled it  
slow in the root cellar. Jelly sealed tight in the jar--  
sugared so heavy your tongue scrapes crystal  
grains across your contented teeth  
long after I am gone, if I am toast.



The sleek glossy plastic makes  
 the horses appear life-like  
 at first. But their legs and necks  
 stay rigid when told to trot.  
 Your hands move the horses  
 and they gallop stiff as starched linen  
 across the kitchen floor while you cluck.  
 You can ride pretend, run and jump over chairs,  
 over boxes, over shoes blocking the way.  
 You play all day and spin stories  
 sure to come true.  
 You track hoof prints on the carpet  
 and stomp at the cat romping  
 around like a prize bucking bronc.  
 And when the horses have had enough  
 you place plastic hooves back on the shelf,  
 clip-clop away and kick up one last buck.

“In 2009, our administration led a public school system reform. The administration believed that for the American population to compete in a global workplace, American students would need better math and science skills, and it came up with an astoundingly astute plan that called for a boost from the average seven hour school day,” snickers and gasps rose and interceded the lecture, “to an eleven hour school day.” Again, students leaned towards one another and whispered.

“This ground breaking change instigated a new way to look at public school operations and eventually led to the 2018 reform that created day-long public school and then to the 2025 reform that changed public school systems into the boarding school systems we know today, that hold students year round with a two-week spring vacation.” The instructor clasped her hands as her eyebrows raised and disappeared under the bottom of her sharply cut bangs.

“And now in the coming months the School Board will commence the new Womb to Workplace program!” Her voice perked at the title. “This program will place newborn babies into the loving care of strict educational providers,” she paused and unfolded her hands. “As much as your parents appreciate you, they’re just not educated in the proper method of cultivating a child’s intelligence.”

Clapping started with the red haired Abigail Sanders, continued with Forrest Thomas and finished in the back of the room with the hesitant acceptance of Folly Liddell. Folly hesitated at the clapping because she knew her parents were expecting a baby boy this coming week and they had written Folly about how excited they were to spend the usual allotted three years with the new baby boy. Folly started clapping,



however, because her parents had also written to her about the fact that change equaled progress and the United States was the most progressive country in the world.

Folly sighed as she thought of her parents and looked down to the notebook they had given her when she visited them during spring vacation last May. She laid the black fountain pen on the pad of paper and glanced up to watch Dr. Barst continue the American History of Educational Progress lecture. Instead of listening, however, Folly sucked on her lower lip and began to mentally tabulate the amount of study hall she would need to complete her homework. She'd need at least an hour to finish Linear Algebra and another to study for the Anatomy test, she thought. She cringed when she realized that she would need two hours to work on the problems for Qualitative Theory of Ordinary Differentials. Realizing that she would need to use almost half of her ten-hour study hall, Folly's shoulders sunk towards her desktop and she pulled her pen slowly across the white paper. She tipped the pen to the paper again and watched as ink pooled into a dark spot.

The inkblot reminded her of a story that she had found in the basement of the school, where rows and rows of books sat untouched under layers of dust. She thought of the multitudes of dogs with spots just this shade. She smiled from the memory of the story and the young puppies' loving parents.

"Folly!"

Folly jerked out of her reverie and sat up in her chair. "Yes, Dr. Barst?" She looked up to her instructor's looming gaze, pointed nose, and flushed cheeks. Folly shook aside memories of a puffing wolf and sat up straighter as the woman peered closer at Folly.

"Can you please explain why you aren't taking notes?"

Dr. Barst stooped over Folly's desk and touched the tips of her fingers to the pages of Folly's notebook like an evil wizard she had read about who tried to kill a frightened crazy-haired boy.

"How do you expect to study from a notebook with so many splotches?" Her long fingers pulled up the pad of paper and held it up in the air.

"Class," She turned towards the eyes of young students, "This is how *not* to take notes." She folded the notebook in half so that the black spots could be better seen by the class. "This is why we decided to take notes on *computers*."

Folly slouched in her seat. She hoped that no one would notice if she shrunk so small that, like another character in a book she found, she could slide away on a river of her own tears. But she didn't shrink. She only sank down into her chair and forced her breathing to calm. Her eyebrows knit together as Dr. Barst placed the notebook back onto the desk in front of Folly.

Looking at the mangled notebook made Folly want to burst into tears, but she knew that would only leave her with extra homework and less free time in study hall. So, she didn't cry. She instead pushed a strand of hair out of her face and slowly reached for the notebook. Her small fingers pressed out the thick fold of the twisted cardboard; Folly remembered how her mother and father's smiles had widened when Folly had opened and become fascinated with the notebook. They had found the prized gift and the accompanying fountain pen at an antique shop and Folly had been mystified by their stories of all of the other items that they had seen in the store. She remembered laughing until her stomach ached when her father had described an old toy with a crank that had scared her parents both tremendously.

With the piercing ring of the final classroom bell, Folly moved along the corridors taking strides the full length of her short legs, her eyes focused not on the children moving around her, but instead on images of a colorless world without emotions and the boy that tried to escape it. When she arrived in the large empty study room and unpacked her backpack, she pushed aside Jonas and started working on the formulas and figures of her homework.

Four and a half hours later, Folly's breathing quickened as she entered in the last of her proofs and closed the top of her tablet computer. She sat for a moment, taking in the excitement of her near future. Her feet jostled under the table she sat at and she tapped her fingers on top of the table.

"Stop it! You're hindering my learning!" A young girl with turned down lips whispered through her teeth to Folly across the table.

Folly smiled at the girl and shoved her tablet into her backpack. "I'm very sorry" she replied and stood up in the crowded room. She moved towards the head desk where a white haired woman sat looking down at a tablet chewing on a pen. Folly imagined the woman as the sorceress from Gillikin County and hoped that she would grant her *her* silver shoes.

The woman looked up to her and smiled broadly, "Good evening, Folly."

"Good evening Mrs. Arthur." Folly stood back on her heels. "I just finished my homework and studying." She said.

Mrs. Arthur's eyes narrowed but her smile didn't fade. "Does that mean that your Linear Algebra testing scores will be higher this week?"

"Oh yes." replied the girl. She took a deep breath in. "I was hoping that I could help you file a bit more."

Mrs. Arthur turned to open a drawer of the desk. "It just so happens that I will need these files put into the basement.

Remember that I need them color coordinated, cross listed with all of the rest of the files and then numerically tabbed."

Folly nodded quickly and took the files from Mrs. Arthur's outstretched hands but, before she could turn around, Mrs. Arthur whispered her name and Folly looked up into her azure eyes. "Once upon a time, eight-year-olds read all of the time." She whispered.

Folly's eyes widened as she let herself entertain the thought. "Really?" She said. "But what about their homework?" She asked.

"Eight-year-olds didn't have homework."

"Wow." Her lips wrapped around the syllable as her eyes glistened with the world she could only imagine.

"Go on now." Mrs. Arthur turned back to her tablet.

Folly moved out of the study room, her mind still playing with the idea of an absence of homework and a plethora of reading hours. She walked along the corridor, stepped down four flights of stairs and then entered into the musky basement floor of the school. Following the noticeable footprint path in the dust, Folly walked through alleys of overturned desks and chairs, passed old electronic parts, broken lamps, and dozens of faded plastic objects that Mrs. Arthur had once called "balls." Finally finding the white door behind the chaos, Folly turned the doorknob into a menagerie of worlds. She breathed in the deep heavy smell of the smoky musk of old books. Her breathe quickened in her young body as she moved along the racks of books, graying with the layers of cotton-like dust. When she pulled *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* off one of the shelves and opened to the second chapter, Folly exhaled as she thought about her own door in the back of the wardrobe.



My gutterface brings out  
 unease in your eyes;  
 distance builds in your body,  
 your pace quickens, high heels  
 clip-clopping down the sidewalk,  
 attempting to dart by quickly—  
 to get away.

I smirk,  
 curling my lips, showing my teeth  
 gauged ears, wild neon-green mohawk  
 and tight black clothes  
 turning you off

as I tap my cigarette, headphones  
 on, keeping in rhythm with  
 “Bulls On Parade,” leaning  
 against the chain link fence.  
 Inside my hardened shell—  
 I know who I am.

You, with your verbal intellect  
and chaotic world. Your disdain  
for words like beauty, God, soul,  
heart, truth.

You have discovered the loss  
of meaning, and celebrated the death  
of evening stars and daffodils flitting  
their yellow bodies.

How I long to be like you:  
long face and fierce eyes,  
verbal insight to the death  
of meaning in this world—  
how insightful you are.

But I, being a plebeian of words,  
and quiet lover of language and metaphor,  
will continue to write of meadows  
that hold the body, or poems that  
hold the spirit, or a faith that holds  
the suffering heart.

For just now, in the placid tone of  
evening wind, I heard not from machines,  
nor nations, nor politics, nor books,  
the gentle sound of a whisper—  
like God's voice calling,  
reminding me it begins anew tomorrow,  
it begins anew tomorrow.

### October 2003: Freezing Night at Home

From nowhere, a loud *crash* rattled the house.  
My body froze, and then I heard an awful cry, "Someone!  
Call the ambulance!"

I leapt off the forest-green recliner and threw my textbook  
and notebook aside. As I rushed into the kitchen, I found my  
dad in a crumpled heap in front of the refrigerator. He must  
have been thirsty; I remember swinging the fridge door closed  
and snatching a half-drunk liter of orange juice from his limp,  
tan hand, and then realizing that Emily had walked into the  
house just as dad collapsed.

My sister frantically called 911 and sputtered into the phone,  
telling the operator what had just happened. My mom, bent  
over my dad's body, grabbed his hand and shook it, "Come on!  
Come on! Get up! You can do it!" It reminded me of an  
animal-lover coaxing a poor creature from the depths of a trap.

I felt helpless. When my mom rushed to the phone to call  
911 again, I took my dad's hand and resumed her hopeful  
words. His hand, so rough from the field, machines, and heavy  
equipment – a farmer's hand. My dad's hand, lifeless, and in  
my own. I shook his hand frantically, hoping it would somehow  
wake him up. I remember the look of his face and hazel eyes,  
wide open, staring up at me. Yet, an awful feeling made me  
realize no one was "there." His lips were spread apart, and by  
this time, he had begun sputtering, as if he was trying  
to say something.

Emily fell to her knees across from me and ordered me to  
stand back. Only a junior in high school, she blew a swallow of  
air into his mouth and began pumping his chest up and down.  
"Alyssa! Call Cheryl!" Mom cried out. I have always admired  
Mom's ability to think openly and clearly in times of stress.

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Cheryl, a close friend who lived just a half-mile from our farm, was the high school's health teacher. Besides teaching nutrition and physical education, she also instructed students on the correct procedure of CPR and Heimlich maneuver.

I rushed to the telephone hooked to the wall and yanked our old, tattered telephone book out of the cubby in the cupboard. I flipped towards the back where I would find the *Webster* listings. Flicking a few pages, I spotted the M's, and began searching for *McCreary*. In a sudden panic I noticed that the entire page was nearly torn out of the book. I fumbled to match names on one side of the page to numbers on the other side. Finally, I found a corresponding number to the last name McCreary.

I punched the tiny buttons, hoping for a quick answer. I did not have to wait long. A woman's voice answered, "Hello?"

"HI! Is this Cheryl?" I gasped into the receiver.

"No, I'm afraid –" she started.

"Sorry! Wrong number!" I slammed the phone back down and turned again to the phone book. *Damn it—why does the page have to be torn?* I found another number that seemed to line up evenly to *McCreary* and struck the little keys a second time. A woman answered again, "Hello?"

"IS THIS CHERYL?" I nearly hollered into the phone. She heard the panic and hysteria in my voice.

"No. This is the wrong number," the same woman said gently. My urgency started to scare her, "Is—is everything alright?"

"I've got to go..." I hung up and felt deathly sick. Emily gave an awful cry of alarm. As she was still trying to resuscitate Dad, his stomach started to empty, vomit trickling down his cheeks and chin.

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### September 2007: Senior Year

Strutting into my high school on the first day of my senior year, I finally had it all. I had lost all of that damn weight that stole my confidence, and I never felt more beautiful than I did then as a lean 113-pound girl. I felt attractive, dressed even more stylish, and walked even more confidently. For the first time in my life, I wanted to be myself rather than someone else.

As weeks wore on, my confidence in my own perfection only continued to grow. I was in complete control over my life and only a fool would dare cross my path! I presided over countless organizations and handed in numerous scholarships. I even had my very first boyfriend, who secretly loved having a trophy girlfriend. He would squeeze my waist and compliment me on my chiseled stomach. I intimidated teachers, my friends, and even those who once teased me on my klutziness.

And more important than any other accomplishment, I maintained my perfect figure. Good riddance to the old disgusting me! I could hardly believe I spent sixteen years of my life being 'normal'... 'average'...*FAT!*

Each meal provided a new challenge that I happily accepted: how little can I eat without my family or friends interjecting. At the lunch table, I watched my friends scarf down hundreds of calories. Greasy fat crawled in and out of gleaming lasagna like worms. Two hundred and fifty calories, at least! And why did they choose 2% milk over skim milk? Do these people not think? They could have saved another thirty calories!

I perched myself at the end of the long lunch table bleacher, both proud I did not engage in bestial feasting, but also secretly wishing I could vanish into the thin air to avoid degrading and confused looks from my concerned friends.

However, I didn't care what they said and thought; my body, my rules. And the rule was to have a carton of skim milk and a small apple from our Harrelson fruit tree everyday at lunch.

But wait! No one can see through my skim milk carton... I can get away with only drinking HALF of it. I can save forty-five worthless calories! My horrendous, average old-self will never again find me.

### October 2003: Freezing Night

"Pray!" shouted my mom. After thirty toxic minutes of horror, the ambulance finally came, allowing us to turn the situation over to professionals. We were now driving cautiously on the snow-caked gravel road. By the time we reached the highway, the ambulance was nearly a mile ahead of our red Ford Excursion. Blue and red flashing lights flickered onto the quiet landscape, announcing our emergency.

I sat in the backseat with my hands folded tightly in my lap talking to God. Gazing out the window into the endless night, I promised to give up everything I owned—my toys, my CDs, my stuffed animals—just so my dad could have his life given back to him. *Please, God...Don't take my dad. I'll do anything—give anything—for our family to remain whole. Why is this happening to us?*

We arrived in Webster and instead of slowing, my mom put her foot down on the gas. At 11:30 at night, no one was lingering in our sleepy town. My mom took complete disregard to the solid white lines on the road; Main Street was ours.

As we pulled up to the front doors of the little county hospital, my sister leapt from the Ford, rushed to the entrance, and banged frantically on the windows. Our pastor, already somehow aware of the situation, stumbled around the corner and pushed the doors open for us.

As we sprinted down the spotlessly white halls, a nurse ushered our frightened party into a tiny, private waiting room.

"We are working on him..." she assured us and left.

After a tense, hushed moment, Pastor Will directed us to the old, brown, plaid couch and suggested quietly, "Let's say a prayer."

The tension in that small waiting room grew. We could feel desperation's grip reach around our necks, strangling us and shoving painful lumps into our throats. As we clung to Pastor, Landon and Emily cried softly. Mom's face was drained to a ghostly white. I just stared at my light blue plaid pants and prayed that somehow, someday, someone would hear our prayer.

After 10 minutes of Pastor's prayer, the nurse returned. Barely raising her gaze to look at us, she choked on her own words, "I'm so sorry. We did everything we could. He didn't make it."

Silence.

"Oh no..." Mom breathed, shedding her first tears for her lost husband. Landon and Emily began sobbing, burying their heads into Mom's and Pastor's soft shoulders.

Me? Stunned. My dad was gone. A rock-hard lump formed in my throat, causing me to gasp for air. I wanted to cry, but my eyes refused. Sick to my stomach, I sat between my family members and their gushing faces.

Where do we go from here?

### December 19, 2007: Day Co. Hospital

"Alyssa?"

I looked up from my small hands. I flexed them, fascinated by the ray of bones right under my purple skin.

“We’re ready for you...” I threw a health magazine aside and followed a younger-looking nurse out of the waiting room, decorated with a small, cheery Christmas tree. Blinking lights and shiny garland looped over the gray walls. The nurse led me to the scale again, hidden in a secret corner of the office. This must have been my third or fourth visit to the County Hospital. Though I denied it, I had anorexia, and the school demanded that I receive regular checkups at the local clinic as I recovered. I was supposed to be eating more and gaining weight.

She recorded the numbers and ushered me into a nearby room. Here, she proceeded to check my pulse while I was sitting...and then while I was standing...and then while I was lying down...*What a stupid routine! Just leave me alone!* I checked the look on my mom’s face; she thought it was stupid too. She and I, mother and daughter, think so much alike. After finishing her brainless practice, the young lady finally left us in peace.

Moments later, the head nurse waddled into the room. Over the previous month, I grew to like her. She was a short, plump woman, with fiery-red hair. She seemed to understand me completely and encouraged me to fight back.

This time, however, she had lost her warm smile and compassionate eyes. She sat down across from me and said matter-of-factly, “Alyssa, you have lost another half of a pound. Since you haven’t improved in any way, I have arranged for you to arrive at an eating disorder inpatient treatment center in Fargo on December 24 at 8 a.m. There is only one bed available, and I’ve decided that you are going to take it. If your mom doesn’t drop you off at that time, we *will* take legal action against her.”

Me? Stunned. My heart stopped, and at the same time, started pounding. The thoughts in my head screeched to a halt, and at the same time, accelerated even faster. My brain went numb. My stomach was in my feet. Complete silence. And that goddamn rock—the one I hated so much—was back in my throat again.

“Wh-what?” I choked, bursting into tears. “B-b-but it is Christmas Eve! It is my favorite day of the year. I will miss Christmas! New Year’s—!”

The nurse interrupted, “Yes, well, Christmas is just another day out of the year and your health is more important.” She held out her hand to shake mine. Through teary eyes, my hand limply found hers and she walked out of the room.

I wanted to smash something. I wanted to smash the nurse! Why did I give into defeat so easily? I wish (and to this day, I wish) I would have stood up, spat in that woman’s face, gave her a mighty “F\*\*\* off!” and stormed out of the clinic, head held high.

But I didn’t. And I never did go to Fargo.

### **April 2008: Four Months Later**

Suppertime – oh goody.

I slowly opened the refrigerator to assess my options. The bulb inside flicked on, shining across my ‘new’ body. After gaining about twenty-five needed pounds, my size 4 American Eagle jeans felt unbearably snug. I considered what had happened the last few months.

My senior year was winding to a close with just a month left. School and extracurricular demanded as much as ever, but my motivation and attitude took a turn south. I wanted nothing more than to liberate myself from this area and begin fresh

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and not be constantly under the observant eyes of my teachers, classmates, friends, and family. They seemed satisfied to watch my body thicken, and all the while, I felt a darkness enshroud me. Angered, I hated their lack of perception.

I reached for the gleaming pot of chili – Mom makes the best chili. Two-hundred and fifty calories per cup, I assume. I grabbed an apple, a good addition to the soup. That attaches another sixty calories to my meal. I decided to eat because my body needs the protein and other nutrients to survive. The door suctioned itself shut after I nudged it with my knee. With efficient, fluid motions, I set the pot down on the counter, moved the bowl over to the side, and went over to the refrigerator to grab a diet pop.

As my hands went for the fridge door, my eyes fell in shame to the navy braided rug under my socks...Dad died here. And I couldn't help but notice that the place in front of the refrigerator, where he forcefully died, was also where I seemingly *chose* to die. All I could do is hope I didn't disappoint him.

I had wanted to be flawless for my family. In the pursuit of perfection, I fear I shoved even more stress and sadness upon my already tried family. They never mention or refer to those months. The past festers behind us, but the guilt I feel is sometimes agonizing. I hope they forgive me.

I hope Dad forgives me.

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Your face screams denial—  
seeing past my squared shoulders  
and my jutted out jaw,  
rage pulses from your blue eyes  
embedded in shadows  
under greasy blonde hair.  
You label me a kamikaze  
from inside the glass.  
I don't care.  
Closing my eyes, I prepare for  
the next assault,  
for roommates talking by slamming doors,  
my birthday card from Dad M.I.A. again.  
Although I'm not happy all the time  
I can still deal  
without counselors,  
boxes of tissues, and unwanted sympathy,  
without my mother's Zoloft  
with its synthetic happiness  
packaged in pink tablets.  
I will stand.  
So even if I look like I'm retreating—  
I don't want, *need* pills.  
I am ready to wage war  
against the urge to give up  
and the seduction of my pillow.

A Ping-Pong ball bounces off the rim of a lone  
red Solo cup. a drunken friend pats my shoulder saunters away  
to girls. I slide through a side door to see smokers  
talking quietly, they offer a smoke. I pass  
leaning against a car, dark clouds press down  
not even a star for company. inside  
the intoxicated kitchen has a slippery floor  
intelligent conversations of world peace, solving hunger  
dissolve into giggles, mumbles  
no friends tonight, they want to score  
a stranger bumps my chaste Mountain Dew  
to the gray linoleum, the yellow-green liquid mixes with spilt  
beer and mixers. the connection lost  
stuck to dirty shoes.

She has never seen your face,  
but she knows every intimate detail  
of your body—that dark  
mole on your inner thigh?  
oh yeah, she knows it's there.

Her dry palms open  
your color-coded file, alphabetized  
from the day you began to breathe.  
Every dimension, volume, and quantity  
of you belongs to a cross-referenced system  
she categorizes. Punching holes

in your annotated pain,  
and the prescription for it, she flinches—  
a yellowed, broken nail now stapled  
to your reports; those catalogues  
of lab results, dictations, blood work, diagnostics,  
and whether your insurance will cover it all.

She fingers your anxieties, licks  
her index finger, thumbs through  
your anemia, pneumonia, uremia—  
her lipstick stain  
on the corner of your heart-rate.

Folders she flings into the recycle bin  
of her archives await termination.  
Don't worry, you're not there yet.  
Instead this Norn lifts her coffee mug  
from its brown stain fading  
into your cover, shuffles some paper,  
and high-heels it to the break room  
for a smoke.

If she hadn't knocked over all those beer bottles, I wouldn't  
have even realized she was leaving. After a lengthy night of  
drinking, she rolled out of my bed and without looking, her  
freckled foot gave the slightest tap to one of the middle bottles  
in our magnificent beer-amid. I sprang from my bed at the  
sound of glass breaking and the stench of stale Fat Tire rising  
from my dirty green carpet.

"Oops," she pushed her red hair behind one ear and looked  
back at me, "Do you have a towel?"

I pointed my finger towards the bathroom where two towels  
hung from the bathroom door, one white and one black. Still  
naked, she gingerly steps around the broken glass, past a pile  
of last night's clothes and through a narrow space between the  
coffee table and my TV. In one swift motion she ripped  
the black towel off the door and lobbed it over the jagged  
mess on the floor.

"This place is small," She surveyed the size as she tip-toed  
back. She balanced herself as she made her way back to bed.  
She threw herself on top of me, her red hair covering my face  
and the warm sensation of her lips touched my neck. But, the  
body heat suddenly pulled away, and her face rested on my  
chest. "I don't know what I'm doing here."

"What do you mean?" I lift my head to see her.

She didn't respond and dug her fingers into my belly hair.  
She pushed herself off me, she quickly gathered her things.  
A pack of Winston cigarettes, a cellphone, a pack of  
wintergreen gum, condoms, and a small ring are thrown into  
her bag-lady purse.

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Our friends had collectively ditched us at the bar, not just  
a bar, a shitty bar full of sad desperate souls. Beaten down

souls trying to recover from a hard day's work surrounded by drifting clouds of cigarette smoke beat their heads against the maroon walls covered in tacky hair-metal posters. Her name was Diane, and she a friend of a friend of a friend. I had seen her around; she was always on campus although I was clueless as to what she studied. We both sat, not talking, waiting for our friends to return.

"Where did everyone go?" She puffed a cigarette with her arms crossed and looked over her shoulder.

I shrugged and kept my eyes down.

She reached into her cellphone and jabbed her skinny fingers into the digits, waiting a few minutes before she left an angry voice mail, hurled her cellphone into her purse, and then started to interrogate me.

"Who do you know? Can you call them? Where did they go? Can we get out of here? It smells like ass. Do you have any cigarettes? I'm low on cash. Can you get me a beer?" Her eyes looked helpless and her lips pouted, "Please?"

I got up and ordered two O'Dell India Pale Ales and watched her from the bar. She fixed her hair, reapplied make up, and made kissy faces into her compact mirror. I watched her adjust her black sheer stockings when a loud obese man, who looked like a trucker started to make cat calls, "That's right, honey! Let's see those legs." She glared back and gave him the finger, which was met with laughter by the trucker and his friends. She crossed her arms and stared straight ahead, avoiding eye contact with anyone. I came back and plopped the frosty mug in front of her. "Making friends, huh?"

She rolled her eyes, "Why are guys such assholes?"

"Hey," I defended myself, "I just bought you a beer and I am an asshole?" I started to pull her beer away and her hands quickly wrapped around the glass.

"No no no! You are okay. You seem nice." She smiled and started to pull it back. "How did we end up here again? Who do you know?"

"I'm friends with Kevin, my name is Chris." I started to explain, but by the look on her face she still was clueless to my identity.

"Kevin, ya know? Sophie's boyfriend?" I waited for some sort of vague understanding.

"Right, Kevin!" She glanced at the condensation on her glass. "So, what should we do? Do we wait for them?"

"Well, I imagine they aren't coming back. So, we should probably go find them after this drink." I took a long gulp of my beer. She nodded her head and took small sips of her beer.

"This is really different." She examined her glass and smelled it.

"Yeah, it has lots of hops in it." I took another gulp.

"Why are you drinking so fast? Can't stand another moment alone with me?" She smiled

I chuckled, "No. I just like beer."

"Well, slow down." She put her hand on my wrist, "I like beer, too. But I drink slow."

I started to slow down my pace.

"Do you got a girlfriend, Chris?" She looked at me as she took another small sip and winced as the bitterness hit her tongue.

"Oh," I laughed nervously, "No, not at the moment."

She smiled and took another sip of beer, "Whew, this is way too bitter."

"It is pretty bitter."

"Can you finish mine? You're almost finished." She slid me her glass. I finished both beers and we left.

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Bar-hopping is a particularly annoying sport. If you got a girl with you, it could be any girl at all, every douche mouth and jack ass goes out of his way to insult you and hit on the girl. I wonder to myself how well these tactics work, and what type of girl was attracted to such charms. Seriously, how flattering is the nick name "sweet cheeks?" Or being groped and hung on by a drunken stranger who clearly only sees one purpose for any woman, a warm place for his genitals. It's really interesting. What's even more interesting is to see some dumb girl giggle at these advances. Diane was not as susceptible to such charms. She stuck her nose in the air and linked arms with me and always responded with, "I have a boyfriend."

We walked down the long stretch of bars and by-the-slice pizzerias as she pushed closer to me, and looked over her shoulder. I looked at her and said, "Seriously, why would a guy think that would be a good way to approach a girl? Can't they see they are being assholes?"

"Some guys think we like that sort of thing. Some of us do, but once you reach a certain age, it really does become a bunch of crap." She sighed, "I hate boys."

We walked a few paces further, "Hey, did you call Kevin yet?" She stopped and looked up at me and flicked her head back, tossing back her red hair that was covering her brown eyes.

"Oh, not yet." I rubbed my hand through my brown hair and opened my cellphone and scrolled through my contacts to find Kevin's number. I ignored the insults of large groups of polo wearing frat boys who not only share a brain but also a wardrobe. "Get out of the way, jack ass," said one, followed up by, "Why don't you let your girl come over to our place after the bar closes?" I was about to give him the finger, but Diane

pushed back my hand and started to point and yell, "Listen, fuck head. What makes you think any girl would want to go anywhere with you? You think that's a good way to treat a woman? Why don't you come back here and I'll stomp your balls in for you?" She went on and on as I tried to get a hold of Kevin.

"Kevin, Kevin it's Chris..." Diane's screaming was so loud I could barely hear him. I stepped away a few feet, "Where did you...Oh? All the way over there? Are you going to stay there?" Our call was cut short by the excitement surrounding a karaoke machine, finishing the call by yelling "Free Bird!" into my ear. By this time Diane had finished chastising the frat guy and was ready to get to the party "Where are they?"

"They're over at Dennis's. Across the tracks."

"Is that where they're staying?" She finally separated from my side as we left the downtown area.

"Yeah, Kevin has found a karaoke machine, and he's singing or listening to Free Bird. That at least buys us, like what? An hour?" The joke was dumb, like most of my jokes, but she smiled and ran her fingers around the outside of my green-hazel eyes. "Your eyes have two colors." I smiled as she studied them, "Green on the outside, and hazel around the pupil." She carefully analyzed them for a second and cocked her head to the side; she made a humph noise and then smiled at me. We continued on to the party.

Dennis's party is hardly a party anymore by the time we arrived. People in the last throes of drunkenness, trying so hard to stave off passing out, have resorted to primitive ways of communication. Grunting and pointing for another beer, slapping and grunting when displeased with something, establishing territory by throwing others off the couch to sleep.

It's sad sight to see a grown man reduce another grown man to tears over a spot on the couch.

Kevin, the last of the group, sat in a chair with his mouth wide open, drooling, his cellphone at his side. "Jesus," I thought to myself, "What the hell happened to these depraved souls?"

We made our way through the house and looked for someone who might still be awake. In the kitchen, we noticed all the cupboard drawers were open. On one shelf we noticed a bunch of mismatched salt and pepper shakers. Diane reached up and grabbed one, "How come none of these have their other?"

"What?"

"Well, he only has one of each pair. Like, he only has the pepper shakers. What happened to the other one?" She pushed aside the first row of shakers, "Hey, I have a pair that look like this!" She pulled out a small owl pepper shaker. "They don't look exactly like this, but sort of." She smiled as she surveyed the owl and put it back in its place. "Do any of them look like your shakers?"

I reached for a rigid brown and beige pair. "Well, yeah these. I steal these from McDonald's all the time." She wrinkled her nose and took the shakers back in the cupboard. She lit a cigarette and surveyed the kitchen.

"Great party, Chris." Diane piped up. "You got any beer at your place?"

"I always have beer at my place," I looked at the red ember on her cigarette. "But smoking is nasty, and you're cold attitude has left a distaste in my mouth."

"Uh, are you serious?" Her eyes turn to darts as she studied my cracking smile, and then she punched my arm. "Fuckin' dickhead." I rub my arm and return to the conversation, "Yeah, I got beer. Do you just want to chill at my place?"

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As I sat here with this woman in my single room apartment, I realized she was in her early thirties and has a career. I was merely in my mid-twenties, but at this moment, I was certain I was in the presence of a heavenly being. More than a woman, less than an angel. Diane, although older, was more in touch with the going-ons than most of my peers. She was sophisticated; we could talk about books and film. She was still young enough to have her dreams but old enough to have a career. She didn't look her age; she was young, youthful. Ready to party, more life than some of my peers.

I watched her play with my records as to find the perfect song for getting dressed. "Do you have any Flaming...you do!" She pulled the record out and plopped it on the turntable. "Mr. Fancy Pants with the record collection. Nothing says music snob like a record collection." I yawned and stretched my arms out. "Do you want to get breakfast or something?"

She hesitated a bit, "Uh, ya know, I should really get home." She picked my white socks off her gray skirt and flipped her hair over her shoulder as she sat on the foot of my bed. "I got a lot of work to catch up on." She looked back at me and furrowed her brow. "Did we really drink that much last night?" She looked down at the fallen beer-amid hidden underneath the towel.

"We were up pretty late," I reached for a shirt.

"Yeah," She stood up and puts her shirt on and then looked in my mirror to tease her hair. Diane lay down next to me again and snuggled up. "Can I get your number?" I tried to steal her phone away to dial it in, but she blocked my hand, "Just tell me, jack ass." Her hands punch in the numbers, and then she tucks her fingers into my palm.

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“You’re a real cool guy.” She looks away. The morning had been filled with more affection than just a one night stand. “Can I see you again?” She rose to start walking out the door.

“Of course. Just call.”

We walked to my front door hand in hand. She stopped and pressed her lips against mine. “There’s just one more thing.” She ran her fingers through her long red hair and not able to make eye contact, she mumbled, “I have a boyfriend.” She held up her cellphone to show the background of her and a man in his early 40’s.

“Uh.”

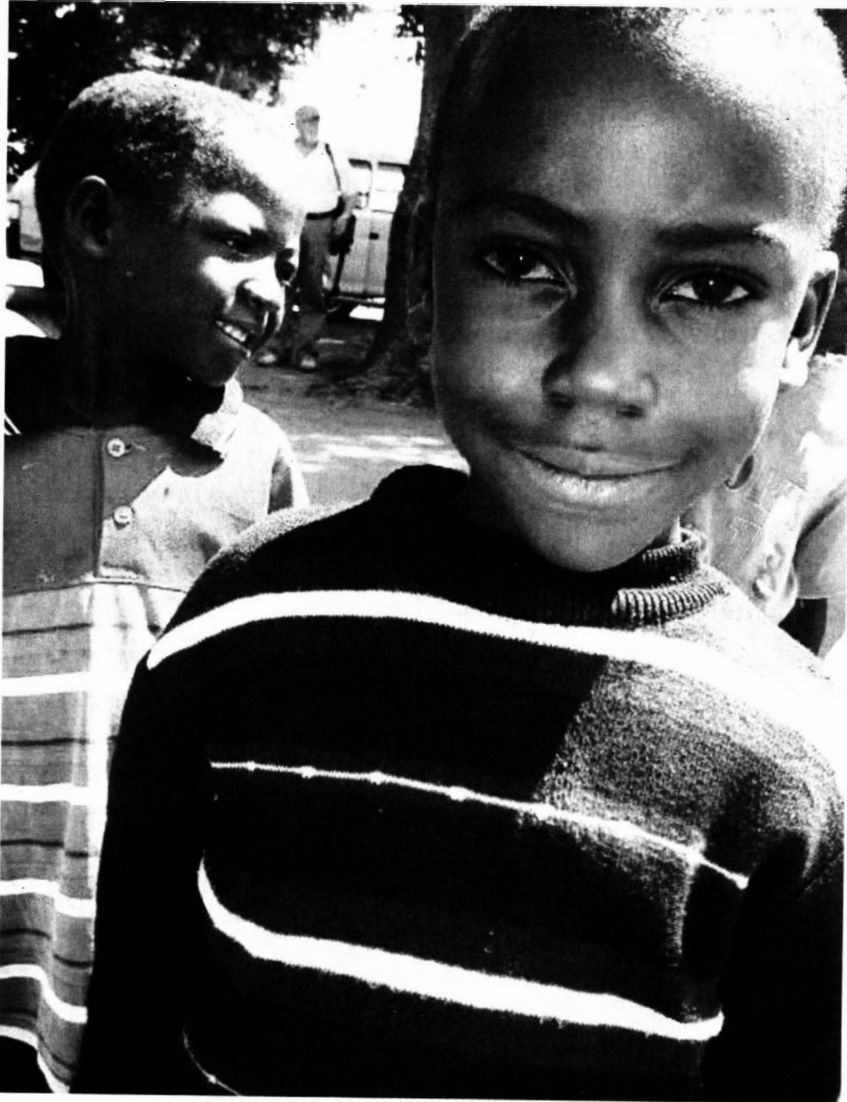
“I still want to see you, but you really can’t tell anyone about this.” She put her phone back in her purse. “It could fuck a lot of stuff up for me. For both of us, actually.”

She wrapped her hands delicately into my forefinger and index finger. She disappeared down my apartment building corridor and headed for her place with the matching owl salt and pepper shakers. I hung my head and started to clean up the broken beer bottles.

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Moon streams blue shadows,  
Casting them through my window,  
Spinning a rectangle at the foot of my bed,  
Rippling pools of light.  
And the world, ever so slowly,  
Blows the dust of ruined mountains across my skin.  
I look outside, where the moon sits.  
Wind summons shapes in the crisp air.  
The wisp of my breath  
Drifts from my mouth  
and fades away

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Headed to my new home, I take a detour  
to remind myself of our past.

At Jefferson Court, I pause  
with eyes closed and allow fleeting  
memories of youth:

climbing trees and playing games,  
the safe spot we called home.

Parents quickly peek out patio windows,  
forgotten glasses of iced tea beading  
in the warm sun.

A limitless world, our rushed  
little footsteps, no hiding  
the joy of life.

On my hand a firefly lands,  
perhaps a descendant of one we chased.  
His dark body and antennae illuminate  
the navy sky, a glow reminiscent  
of childhood and a reminder  
something so small  
can be so bright.

# Deciphering the Different values of Color and Light

Tiffany Young

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He sat me down at the dinner table. No one else was home. It smelt like paint. My dad started crying.

“We found this.” On the table he tossed an envelope, opened, but addressed to my cousin in my handwriting. The envelope was crumpled, a little bit lost, with a hastily written letter stuffed inside. The letter detailed what had happened with Cale.

Dad sat slouched forward onto the table, his head cradled in his hands. Silent tears collected in his palms. I had never seen him like this. My dad, always happy-go-lucky, always quick with a smile, had fallen with no visible way of getting back up. He wiped the few remaining tears off his face with his sleeve and glanced at me. I tried to hide. I cringed away from his gaze. He wore his paint clothes, and his cap, usually askew on his head, was instead wrung bare in his hands. Torment visibly tightened his grip.

“We read it,” Dad said, indicating toward the envelope with a nod. He stared at the envelope for a long time, hoping it would undo everything. Reverse what had happened.

“Honey, we know.” He offered a flickering smile. It was quickly gone but reassuring. He was there. I kept quiet. I didn’t speak. I couldn’t speak. Dad took the envelope away, hiding it, but the removal of the letter did nothing to ease the memory.

I had chosen pale pink to paint my room, but that had been weeks earlier. The pungency of the paint tickled my nose. I held the two-inch brush in a grip so tight it made my knuckles white. I focused on making concise, even brush strokes along the corners. I watched as the walls changed from beige to pink in a matter of seconds. But the pastel pink my ceiling transformed into felt wrong. Light colors no longer fit into my life. There now resided a stain that I would never be

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able to rub away. This pale, clean color had no purpose here, but I still painted on as if it didn’t bother me. In a vice-like grip, I continued slowly making my way around the room. The two-inch strip I painted went to, but didn’t invade, the crevice that hid where the ceiling met the wall. If only I could hide in that crevice, be where the pink couldn’t invade my tainted life, then maybe everything would be okay.

My dad and I painted in silence. I’ve always wondered what would have happened had I turned and splattered the air with the paint on my brush. The pink would have made an intricate pattern dividing my father and I on a thick canvas formed by the tense silence.

Dad stopped painting and turned toward me, “Should we take him to—”

“No,” I interrupted, cringing. “No, please don’t.”

Dad nodded and resumed painting. With steady, even strokes he transformed the ceiling from beige to pink. I couldn’t face my father. If only he knew. I couldn’t turn in Cale. I was afraid to.

## The First Time

The room was an unvarying shade of off-white walls, ceiling, and floor. A bleak theme. The frigid February wind gusted about the building, the painted cement floors colder than ice. The bleary off-white paint reminded me of a dingy bedroom ceiling with a single crack in the corner that one might stare at when the mind is full. It’s the kind of off-white that drowns hope but doesn’t completely kill it. The kind of off-white that flickers with something, but you can’t tell what it is. The walls were these over-sized bricks. The machines seemed to have been painted the same off-white. It was the boiler room.

Cale and I had just changed the gels in the lights on the



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catwalk, and all I thought about was getting a kiss or two from the boy I was crushing on.

He put the extra gels he was carrying on the wooden end table that provided the only color in the room, and he pushed me against the wall. I might have enjoyed it a little if it weren't for the ladder that was tattooing its imprint on my back. The off-white paint bore its mark on the ladder, and I broke away from Cale long enough to glance up and see where it led. It led to more off-white nothingness. Annoyed by my distraction, he pulled me back to kiss me.

He started to feel up my shirt. His hand was rough. It felt like sand paper filing away at my skin. With the intentions of being the good Christian girl that I knew I should be, I didn't know what to do. I pulled my shirt down. A couple minutes later, however, he was right back up there. I still didn't know what to do, so this time I did nothing. I let him be. I felt privileged that this boy, whom I wasn't dating, was giving me attention. But what we were doing felt wrong. Christian girls don't do this.

Then Cale unzipped my pants.

I could hear the zipper, loud to my silenced ears, before the rough fabric of my jeans slid down my legs, taking my underwear with it. In one fluid motion, Cale brought me to the floor. I was frightened. Fear blocked my nerves from sending their message of warning to my brain. I was momentarily paralyzed, praying for the reversal of time.

The off-white walls closed in on me as I collapsed within myself, and the oppressive, sinister color overwhelmed me. The off-white nothingness swallowed me whole. I didn't know what he was doing, nor did I want to know. I remained silent as the drowning hope took over and then a searing pain.

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I didn't know what happened, nor did I care. I felt nothing after the first connection. The off-white paint had enveloped me. I had succumbed.

### ...The Second

It was after school. We didn't have rehearsal that day. Cale snuck us in through the light booth window.

"I'll go first and help you through," he said. Using a stepping-stone system, he demonstrated how to climb through. First the wooden chair, then the rickety desk, then the tricky part where one foot went out the window and down to the arm of a waiting auditorium seat, and then to the ground. Cale was on the auditorium side looking in, and I was on the light booth side looking out. I glanced at the door. I looked back at him. He gestured for me to climb through. I began my ascent. Chair, desk, over the window, and down to the ground. He lightly grabbed my forearm and led me to the very last and farthest row in the auditorium.

He sat down. I crumpled into a seat next to him. Sitting in the last row, we could see everything, but the darkness clouded the set. It peered down, intimidating me from afar. I wished the curtains were down so I wouldn't have to look at it. The set didn't offend me. It merely watched me, reminding me of the peers that usually strode across it at this time. It judged me for them. Carrie, my friend, judged me. She abstained from theatre, she wanted nothing to do with it, but her judgment radiated towards me through the set. I had told her about Cale earlier that week, and I didn't expect the reaction she gave me. Carrie was excited about it. When an accidental tear slipped through my protective barriers, she became confused. She understood that sex hurt the first time,

but cry about it? It's fun. I should enjoy it.

Darkness did not completely enshroud the auditorium. A three foot radius of faint, unreliable light that hung right above us fought its way throughout the dark. The timid light unsuccessfully attempted to hide from the surrounding shadows. It was a battle between the darkness and the shaking shimmer of light.

And in this battlefield between light and non-light, Cale brought my face to his. A kiss. I tried to return it. Then he asked me if it was ok. Nothing specific, but I knew what he meant. I muddled through my thoughts, confused and alone. My thoughts struggled with what my lips would tell Carrie. Guilt slashed at my divided conscious. The darkness that imprisoned me worked its way into the recesses of my mind. I couldn't see where my thoughts were leading me. My mouth worked faster than my head and scraped out an inaudible "yes." Cale took my meager whisper as the affirmative that it was and started. He moved us to the floor and a devastated shock further blinded me to what I was doing. My body was on automatic and I had no control.

The sound of a zipper, his, woke me up to the realization that my pants had already been taken down, and one leg was off. With a pounding heart and clammy hands, I grabbed his hands with intentions of stopping him. But I was too late. The light overhead flickered and in that split second of total darkness, my soul screamed. Not again. Not again. Oh God, not again. It was happening, painful as before, and I didn't want to cry out for fear that someone would hear me and find me. I didn't want to be found. I was ashamed. I didn't know how to get out. The darkness of shadows draped over my shoulder and around me, blanketing me. It closed my ears

and numbed my senses. In my numbing despair, I didn't even notice the light continuing to flicker. The darkness had won.

### The Last

We made an escape to the orchestra pit. I didn't know what we were trying to hide from, but we had to get there fast. He told me to crawl. I had to go first. But once we reached the entrance to the pit, I hesitated. It was so dark that it frightened me. Looking back at Cale, I received an urgent nod to move forward. Frozen, I just stared at him. I couldn't go back, Cale would stop me; but I couldn't go forward, my feet wouldn't let me. There was nothing to do, but Cale had other ideas.

He said, "Fine. I'll go first." He disappeared through the crawl space and down the stairs. I waited, unsure of where to go or what to do. I stood up. A light flickered on, sending its faint rays across my feet, casting my hesitant shadow on the auditorium wall.

"Look," Cale said, "I found a light."

His head popped out of the entryway. "I know how much you like to have a light on."

His hazel eyes gazed into me, unconsciously guiltig me. He motioned for me to join him, and his eyes lured me forward. They frightened me, but I didn't dare deny them. My shadow mocked me as I climbed down the stairs, but I turned away from it. My shadow couldn't understand that Cale was nice every once and a while. It danced out of sight once my foot touched the grimy carpet of the pit. The light Cale had found was merely a light bulb atop a pole. It cast a harsh, dull light across the meager room. This unfortunate room housed excess large props. Piles of boxes towered in both corners of the room, a couple Christmas trees stuffed into a

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corner—one hidden away in a box and one not—several area rugs rolled up and stacked pyramid style against the back wall, and a hideous, stuffed fabric pig in the far corner. The pig starred in several notorious theatre legends that gossiping students liked to spread. Rumor whispered secrets to me of several incidents where couples had gotten caught in the act on that pig. Most kids avoided it. I found it disgusting. I couldn't see the appeal behind sex on a fraying, grungy pig pillow.

Cale took my hand and pulled me to the floor in front of the rugs. Tiny rocks, embedded in the ratty old carpet, pinched at my hands when I sat down. Cale looked at me. I looked away. The cracks in the bricks, the duct tape on the boxed Christmas tree, the ugly blue rug—anything other than Cale. But he wouldn't let go of my hand.

I turned toward him, attempting to withdraw my hand from his grip. He kissed me. I neither encouraged nor discouraged him. Fighting what had already happened was useless. He started to pull my shirt over my head. I pulled my arms down, confused. He had never taken off my shirt before. He wrestled my clothes off anyway. All that Cale left were my socks. Exposed, I sat there while he—fully clothed—ran his hands over my bare skin.

He unzipped his pants and pulled himself out. I cringed, looking away. I attempted to cover myself with my hands, but Cale merely pushed my hands away. His fingers brushed my cheek momentarily before transferring its attention to the rest of me, but I kept my eyes focused on the ugly blue rug. I noticed the rug had become eye level. I closed my eyes, bracing myself for what was about to happen.

Searing pain ripped through my body and my eyes tore open as I gasped, pulling away. The rugs trapped me in.

The course under side of the ugly blue rug sanded my right shoulder and arm. It was an old, faded rug. I imagined that its memories were of a happier time in a brighter place. It was a floral navy blue, once regal. It was meant to be stepped on by clean feet. Instead, it was hidden in the pit watching me suffer. The ugly blue rug couldn't do anything to help me. Rigid and tense, it lay on the floor by my side, as powerless as I was.

Once Cale finished, he tucked himself away. "I'll leave first, that way it won't look suspicious."

Huddled with my knees to my chest, I watched him go. The harsh light of the makeshift lamp cast only crueler shadows. I had been abandoned. There was an empty stage above me and an empty room around me with my clothes on the other side. I didn't want to move for fear of grime rubbing off the carpet and onto my already unclean body. I dropped my forehead to my knees. A tear splashed onto my rug burnt knee. Tightly squeezing my knees before releasing them, I inched the two feet to my clothes. Slowly, I put them back on, tainted and soiled.

White Mouse

Amber Cianfrocco

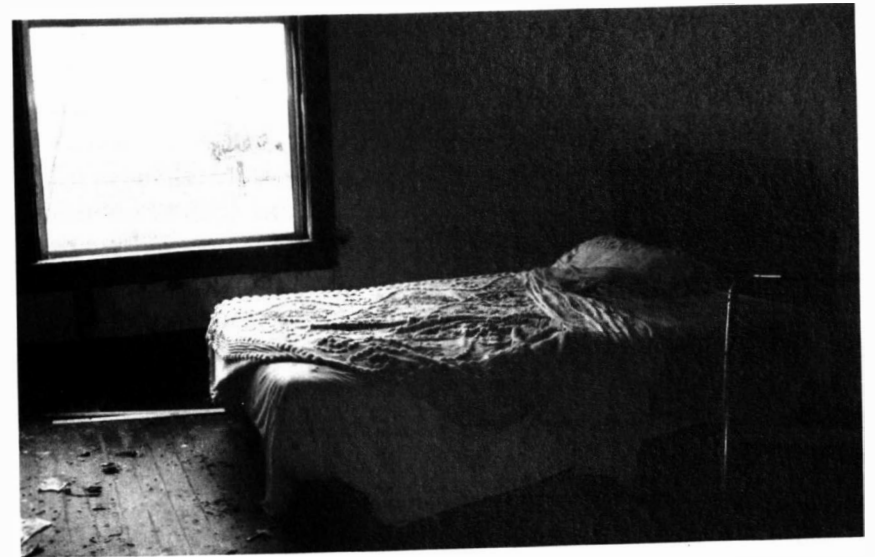
Deserted

Kasi Johnson

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Army emerald serpent, with  
amber jeweled eyes  
stealthily you slithered  
into my life  
emotions starlit crystal,  
melted by your kiss  
my dormant heart set ablaze,  
yet you resist  
venom pierces, splits  
flesh. Your poison  
searing deep within  
my veins  
swallowed by your grip,  
in your belly I lay  
digesting, in acid  
of your love.

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It had been a sad week. Bo's dad had died early Monday morning. He had been sick. Suddenly and inexplicably sick. Wasn't feeling good when he went to bed. Woke up in the middle of the night, stumbled down the hall way, puked, fell over, and died. Bo had seen it all. It still haunted him. Apparently, it had been some kind of food poisoning.

The funeral had been yesterday, Friday. The last of the relatives had left this morning and now Bo was alone. Alone in the house with just his mom who was toiling away downstairs in the kitchen, making some kind of food for dinner. He wondered how she could even feel like doing anything in this sad time, but then thought that maybe she liked to cook because it took her mind off of things.

The big chest was propped wide open. Bo was sitting on the floor, his back leaned up against the chest. Pictures were lying all over the floor. Family pictures. Hundreds of them. He was looking for pictures of his dad. He just wanted to think back to happy times. The good times. How could anything ever be the same again?

He picked up a picture. Brought it closer to his face. It was a picture of his dad holding Bo the day he was born, just bringing him home from the hospital. His dad looked so happy. So young. The big smile on his dad's face brought a smile to Bo's.

Then there was another picture of his dad teaching him to ride a bike. His dad was jogging behind him and his hands were just letting go of the bike, leaving Bo to ride alone. Bo remembered the day. Even though it was so long ago he still remembered it.

"Now I'm going to push you along and you're going to pedal really hard, okay?" said his dad.

"Okay," Bo said.

"I'm going to count to three and then we're going to start moving, alright little man?"

"Okay"

Bo would've said okay to anything his dad said, he loved him so much. He could've said 'I'm going to push you off a cliff now' and Bo would've simply responded, 'okay.'

The countdown started, and before Bo knew it he was moving down the sidewalk. His dad moving along, right behind him. It felt so good, he felt like he was flying! It was the most fun thing he had ever done! He felt like he was doing it alone. He felt like he was in complete control, even though he knew his dad was helping. It was amazing! It made him so confident that he said,

"I think I'm ready for you to let go now."

"I already have!" shouted his dad from further back on the sidewalk. He could hear his mom and dad laughing with joy. Panic overtook Bo.

"What!"

Bo turned his head and saw his parents waving. He wobbled and lost control of the bike. It fell to the side, tossing Bo into the yard. His head bounced off of the ground, but it didn't hurt, he had a helmet on. His heart was still racing with fear. His parents came running over to see if he was alright. His dad was there first.

His dad had always been there for him.

A tear dropped onto the picture and Bo put it back onto the floor, wiping his watery eyes. He reached over and grabbed another picture. It was of him, his dad, and his mom all standing in the living room posing for a picture at a family get together. The same big smile on his dad's face.

The next picture brought Bo back to the past. It was of him and his dad standing on a sandy beach. They were both in matching swimsuits. His dad was teaching him how to skip rocks across the water.

“You don’t throw it like a normal rock, you have to throw it sideways, like this...” said his dad as he threw the rock, whipping his arm to the side. The stone slowly curved toward the water and then splashed across its surface, creating a circle of ripples. The rock bounced back into the air! Then once again hit the surface of the water. More ripples. Over and over again the stone bounced off of the water, going further and further out into the lake. Bo watched in awe at the seemingly magic power of the stone. Each skip of the stone got a little shorter and shorter until finally it disappeared beneath the surface of the water.

“Now you try.”

Bo took his tiny stone and brought it back over his head. Winding up he suddenly snapped his arm forward and released the stone. The little rock flew just a few feet from shore and plopped into the water with a small splash and without a single skip. Bo was now angry.

“It’s okay, just keep trying, you’ll get it...”

“Brad!” his mother called.

“What!”

His dad turned to her, annoyed.

“Come here a minute!”

His dad let out an annoyed sigh and then walked off toward his wife.

Bo picked up more stones and attempted to skip them but it never worked. Each rock just sunk to the bottom.

Just a single splash. He turned to his parents. He saw his father just sitting there, starrng out over the lake, his mother hanging off of his shoulder saying something to him, a pleading look on her face. A small, begging smile.

Bo turned back to the lake. The Sun burned down on his shoulders. It was a hot day. There wasn’t a cloud in sight. The water looked comforting. He gave up trying to skip stones and just ran into the water. Jumped right in. There was a sudden shock of cold all over his body. It felt so nice. He was completely submerged. The water slowly moving over his skin. Soon his head poked out of the surface, and his feet dropped to the bottom. He splashed water up into the air and let it drop back on his face.

He spent the next few minutes swimming around on his back and underwater, as fast as he could. Just enjoying the water. Then he went under and tried to hold his breath as long as he could, but he stopped when he realized he wanted to have a breath holding competition between him and his dad!

Water splashed everywhere as Bo shot up from the bottom, exploding onto the surface. Wiped the water away from his eyes. Turned to shore. His mom was standing up, the camera around her neck, an arm stretched back toward his dad. She was saying something. His dad was just laying there, not responding. She dropped her arm and then turned away, slowly walking down a path, alone.

They had been to the beach plenty of times, but that one time for some reason seemed to stand out in his memory. He did not know why. His dad had seemed a little angry that day, somewhat detached or uninterested in his mom. He didn’t realize it back then, he was too young, but he could see it clearly now reflecting back on it as he was older.

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He never knew what was wrong that day. Must have just been a bad day.

He continued to file through the collection of pictures, each one bringing back a different memory. The same big smile on his dad's face. But the smile was never quite so big as it was the day he got his Mustang. It was a beautiful dark blue 1969 Ford Mustang. In the picture it was sitting proudly in the driveway, sunlight glinting off its surface. The lawn mowers sitting next to it. A jug of antifreeze for some reason sitting on the pavement. His dad was so proud of it. For the longest time he had talked more about the car than anything else. More than he talked about his own wife.

Bo remembered one day when he saw his dad standing at the kitchen window. The car parked outside. He just stood there and admired the car for the longest time. His mother moved back and forth doing household chores behind him. A sullen look on her face.

That same depressed look his father would have, quite some years later when the car was damaged. In fact, it had only been a couple of weeks ago. His mom had come home, tears pouring down her face, apologizing over and over again to his dad. She had wrapped her arms around him. Buried her face in his chest. Sobbed into his shirt. It was difficult to understand her as she spoke. Her voice was muffled in his father's chest. Bo heard her say something about hitting a dog.

Bo went over to the window. Saw the car. Its hood was dented and slightly twisted, the front right side of the bumper and grill were broken apart and a headlight was gone. The windshield was shattered. Bo knew his father must have been devastated, but he kept it all inside. His mom was a wreck but not because of the car. She had been a constant wreck

for quite some time now. She looked as though she needed a vacation from life.

Now he was once again thinking about the present, and all of its sadness, so he picked up another picture and looked at it. It was of his mother. She was sitting on the couch, folding laundry. There was underwear all over the place, Bo's, his dad's, even her underwear and bras lying all over the floor. She looked like a mess and she did not have a smile on her face. But the bras did remind Bo of a funny story that went back to the car.

One time, not too long ago, all three of them were riding in the Mustang. Going up town. Bo was shoved into the back.

It was a warm day. The windows were open. The wind rushed in. Along with all of the smells of summer, the humidity, the smell of fresh cut grass. Bo dropped his head down and let the cool air rush over his neck. There, under the seat, he saw some kind of clothing. He reached down and picked it up. It was a bra. He immediately smiled and threw it up front.

"Bo! What is that!" exclaimed his mother.

Bo laughed.

"I don't know, are you sure it isn't yours?" Bo laughed again, "What are you and dad doing in here?"

They all laughed. His dad, not quite as hard.

"Well Brad?" inquired his mother.

"I don't know honey. You drive this car too don't you? Did you buy that somewhere?"

"No."

"Well then how does laundry end up in the car?"

"I don't know."

That little memory hadn't been very long ago either.

Now a lot of the pictures he was looking at were very recent ones. The next picture had a family friend and neighbor in it. Her name was Janet, and she was very beautiful. She was his mom and dad's age and in the picture she was standing in her own driveway with his mom, their arms around each other. But this picture too, brought back a bad, recent memory.

Only about a week ago they had attended Janet's funeral. Her death had been awful. She was found lying at the side of the road in front of her house. She had gone outside to get her mail out of the mailbox at the end of the driveway. A drunk driver, still hung over from a long night before, swerved over and hit her. The car didn't stop, he just left her there to die at the side of the road. Police couldn't find him. There were just simply no leads. Everyone was devastated. His dad was quiet the entire week, hardly said a word. His mother was angry. Furious. He hadn't realized that she and Janet had been quite that close. She seemed pretty beat up about it. As if all that hadn't been bad enough, a week later his dad was dead. It was all devastating.

There was another picture with a piece of Janet's life in it. She owned a store. A small flower shop up town. She was very proud of it. She considered herself a business woman. In the picture she stood in front of the store, Janet's Flower Shop, with a gigantic smile on her face, her hands on her hips, and chest perked out in pride. The picture had been taken the day she had opened the place for business. It had all gone well for her. Bo's dad helped her remodel the place when she was getting it ready. He would go there on his spare time, some nights, some weekends, all to help her try and get the place ready for business. He was such a good guy, always so helpful.

Bo had learned a lot of good things from his father he would never forget. In fact, in the very corner of the picture Bo could see the front of the blue Mustang. His dad had probably taken this very picture.

Then he remembered one time when he rode with his dad, not too long ago, up to Janet's Flower Shop.

"So are we going to the hardware store?" wondered Bo.

"Yeah, but first I've got to make a quick stop at Janet's."

"Why?"

"Just to talk to her."

"About what?"

"Oh, nothing, you just stay out here and I'll be back out in a couple of minutes," his dad said as he pulled up to the shop and parked the car.

"Okay?"

"Okay."

And with that his dad got out and walked into the store. Bo was all alone. There were no other cars in front of the store. Only a few slowly rolled by. It must not be a busy time of day. On his right an old, homeless bum slowly strolled by. His clothes were torn and dirty. His skin was dark. His hair was white. He seemed very interested in the Mustang and kept looking at it with old, hazed over eyes. He made strange grunting noises, and seemed to be breathing very hard, probably used to be a heavy smoker. The old guy suddenly saw Bo sitting in the car and snapped his head forward continuing down the sidewalk at an even faster pace. Bo was a little worried, he wondered if the guy would've tried to take the car if he hadn't been in there.

A strong gust of wind blew through the open windows of the car. His shaggy hair moved with the breeze. It felt good.



The breeze took with it leaves and little bits of garbage. It all swirled and danced around in whirlwinds, scraping across the concrete. It was quiet. And lonely. He kind of wished his dad would come back out so they could go.

It had now been about five minutes. What was taking so long? His dad had said that it would only be a couple minutes. Bo shrugged it off. Didn't really care. At least the weather was nice.

He reached over and turned the radio on. Static. Adjusted the knob. Music. Country. No. Rock, heavy stuff. No. Old, classic rock. Alright. He dropped his arm back by his side. He suddenly grew more tired. Reached down to the side of his seat and pulled the little lever he found there, dropped the seat back and closed his eyes.

The door opened and Bo jolted awake. His dad came down into the driver's seat. Fired up the car. Pulled out onto the street.

"What took so long!" demanded Bo.

"Oh, you know how Janet is. She talks forever!" laughed his dad.

"Yeah, she's a woman."

They both laughed.

But he also remembered another ride in the car. This time it was with his mom. She wasn't in such a good mood. She was upset about something. She was speeding down the roads.

"Mom, you don't have to go so fast, you have plenty of time to get me to practice."

"Yeah, but I've got to stop at Janet's first."

"Why?"

"Don't worry about it."

Bo didn't worry about it. He knew they were good friends with Janet but he could never figure out why his parents always had to go there.

He jolted with fright when his mother cut across traffic and nearly hit the store as she skidded to a stop in front of Janet's. She got out of the car and didn't tell Bo to stay put so he got out and went into the store right behind his mother who was walking very fast. His mother immediately went to the counter where Janet looked up and saw her coming. Janet smiled and started to say 'hello' when his mother interrupted her in a sharp, hoarse whisper. Janet's facial expression changed from joy to confusion. She motioned for his mom to come to the back of the store and they walked together through a door that clicked shut behind them.

Bo began to wander the isles looking for something that would be of any remote interest to him, but there wasn't. It was all a bunch of girl stuff. Nothing he cared about.

There was yelling. It was very quiet, he almost didn't notice it. He stopped and held his breath. Listened, trying to confirm the sound of yells. He had to wait another minute, but he was finally sure he heard shouting. It was his mother. She was yelling something at Janet, It sounded like they were all the way upstairs. What could his mother possibly be so upset about? He had no clue.

After a few minutes his mom came bursting through the back door. She stormed out the front door without saying anything. Bo followed. The car started. He got in. They were back on the road.

"What was that all about?"

"Don't worry about it. It's nothing."

“It sure sounded like nothing” Bo said sarcastically.

His mom didn’t respond. Just continued to drive. Dropped him off at the school and then took off down the road.

He didn’t see her for the rest of the day.

There were so many pictures on the floor. Too many of them to clean up. He dreaded having to pick them up. But he started to anyway. He knew his mom would definitely not be in the mood to pick up any mess he made.

He spread his hands across the floor. Gathered together as many of the pictures as he could. Straightened them out. And shuffled them together, knocking them against the floor. Very gently he put them back into the chest.

Outside the birds chirped relentlessly. It was yet another beautiful day, but ugly at the same time. His dad was gone. It made the sunny day feel worse than even the darkest rainy day. His dad was not here to enjoy this day. Bo began to tear up again. That’s all any day consisted of anymore, tears and pain.

He gathered together a few more pictures and put them away. He wasn’t getting any good memories from them anyway, all he was beginning to remember were the bad things. The sad things. Why did his dad have to die? And how exactly did his dad die? It was almost as bad as Janet’s unsolved murder, what exactly had happened to his father? Why was he gone?

He picked up one more photo. It caught his attention because it was the most recent one. It was a Polaroid picture. The picture had been taken by Bo himself. The Sunday afternoon just before his dad died he had found an old Polaroid camera in the basement. It even had pictures ready to go. He ran upstairs and quick took a picture of his parents to see if it still worked, it did. And what the camera had caught now terrified him. It gave him answers, answers he didn’t want.

His parents had both been in the kitchen. They both looked tired. His dad especially, looked sick. His skin was pale. His smile was small, remote, and forced. His mother didn’t smile. She still looked angry. She was cooking supper. The pot was steaming on the stove. Next to her leg a cupboard door was halfway open. Sitting on the shelf was a jug of antifreeze. Just like in the old picture of his dad’s Mustang.

## The World's Hunger

Michael Ross

Department: Oakwood

## Ominous

Kasi Johnson

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The horizon rushes to meet the shore,  
To stream onto the sand and glisten.  
Shining soft tendrils of itself,  
Remnants gleam and retreat  
Back into the green froth.  
Waves rush forth again  
like mountains throwing laughter  
across dark chasms.  
And the land aches and shivers each time  
to decide the edge,  
to run on the sand and to shine wet.  
The horizon wakens again,  
laughs, wading into the sea.



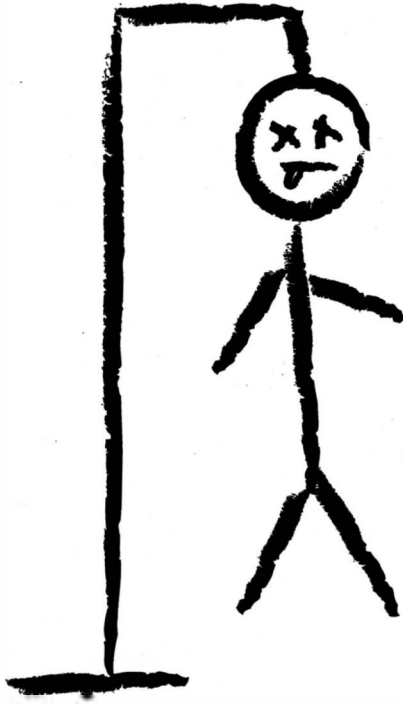
# Morris Brown's Thoughts while Taking His Daily Walk

Laurelle Adkins

Whether the way is more traveled by  
With bleached grass snapped at ground's end  
Or leading through land where no soul has trod,  
(Meadows shaded greens, carpeting the scene)  
Take it! Leave all wandering thoughts if you  
Purpose to know well the road (not) taken.

The path may safely pass a dark marsh  
With quicksand mud unreleasing, mist blinding,  
(One short step from disastrous trouble)  
Or go along a secret wildflower field,  
Luminous rose and clean soil blue;  
Forget the way and miss this wonderful view.

Perhaps you pioneer, departing in  
One direction, marching downward to a  
Dusty hole—crawl up the slope, then trample  
Past to safety. And should you chance upon  
Some charming pond, retrace your steps a mile  
Back for those thinking you fit to follow.



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