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In Order to Live

Madison E. Grapes

Cedarville University, madisongrapes@cedarville.edu

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ABSTRACT

This portfolio, *In Order to Live*, includes some of the poetry and creative nonfiction pieces I wrote as a Creative Writing Minor at Cedarville University. "Printmaking" was published in the June 2015 edition of *Spry*, and "Deep Creek Lake" will be published in the summer anthology of *Snapping Twig*. The collection aims to redeem memory and salvage the sermon from previous experiences. I wrote about fingerprints, worms, grand pianos, the trinity, heartbreak, cancer and so much more to understand why any of it matters, in order to live.

IN ORDER TO LIVE

by

Madison Grapes

A Collection of Creative Writing Submitted to the Faculty of the Department of English,
Literature, and Modern Languages at Cedarville University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Creative Writing Minor

Cedarville, Ohio

2016

Approved by

INTRODUCTION

I named this collection “In Order to Live” because Joan Didion’s words have been droning in my head for weeks. In her collection *The White Album*, Didion states, “We tell ourselves stories in order to live...We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the "ideas" with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.” As a writer, I aim to find the grace in the ghastly. The pieces of poetry and nonfiction in this collection explore varying themes and subjects, but they are bound by the goal of looking, interpreting, and living for that thought-provoking line of truth, the line that rings.

Some pieces are not very difficult to find the sermon. Perhaps the most prominent lesson can be heard in the essay “I Understood the Trinity Better as a Child.” This work is the first in the collection where I directly mention my Christian faith. Well, my faith in the Trinity as a child. As a four-year-old, I found it painless to believe in the supernatural. I found it so easy to submit that my bundled dandelions were received by God who reached his transparent hand down and grabbed them from the lawn. Even now, I smile at the memory of belief that God heard my request, acted so quickly, and received the budded weeds. I wanted to write that moment down, to recall that solid trust in God when two more memories came to mind to complete the trinity. I wanted to preserve my old unwavering confidence in God. It was a good exercise to take up company with my younger self, to feel so confident that it wasn’t the wind that took the flowers instead.

Other pieces such as “Inside the Music Box” and “The Sciuridae” lack a moral message but salvage images and emotions from mundane life. For instance, “Inside the Music Box” seeks to call forth a pristine image of a grand piano. The rhythm of the poem suggests a singsong quality and the tone at the end dims into “silence.” I admit that the description and feelings of the piece originate from the upright piano lingering in my home, out-of-tune and mute most of the time. “The Sciuridae” on the other hand reflects the hustle of the many squirrels I have watched while sitting on the back deck of the lake house my grandfather built. This poem also uses language itself to reflect the squirrel with quick transitions of thought to replicate a squirrel’s spastic route. Although I may not learn of virtue from these poems, they nonetheless commemorate life and challenge me to capture those “little things.”

While there are several poems and creative essays that simply salvage an image or feeling, most of the work deals with pain. I by no means tried to cover my pain, my anger, and my sense of hopelessness in these pieces. I did not try to pretend that I ended my mission trip in Haiti on a good note in “Hunger Pains.” Instead, I focused on the truth that I wish I could forget the boys gripping at my jersey, asking me to give them my shirt, my shoes, or anything besides the message that Jesus loved them in their impecunious state.

The memory of losing my best friend in the seventh-grade still haunts me and so I dedicated three pieces to Danielle. In the creative nonfiction pieces “Danielle Kraynik” Parts 1, 2, and 3 as well as the poem “Danielle Kraynik’s Viewing,” the message and images do not encourage the reader to feel hopeful but lost. These works are pivotal pieces in my writing career because I was no longer only saving images, but interpreting what I saw, what I felt, into narratives that helped me find closure with the loss.

I end the collection with “Ulnar Collateral Surgery or He Calls His Right Arm Tommy or I Watched Them Drill Holes in His Elbow” because it was the last piece I wrote for the Creative Writing Minor at Cedarville University, and I learned through the process of writing it how to deal with current pain. I didn’t solve my broken relationship, I didn’t gain the courage to break it off, I didn’t learn to stand up for myself—I simply enabled myself to step back and read the reality I was living. I enabled myself to get the empathy I so desired. Then, I felt enabled to change.

I’m thankful that I pursued the Creative Writing Minor at Cedarville University, otherwise, I may not have learned of the coping effect writing holds for me. The ability to collect and witness events in life, and then turn them into story has allowed me to return to the rubble and rescue a moral lesson, a forgotten image, or a sense of closure by placing a period at the end of the truest sentence I could compose. Although I have sent many of these pieces out for publication, I’m not crushed by the rejection of all but “Print Making” and “Deep Creek Lake” since I wrote every piece for me. I wrote them in order to understand, to relish, to live with hopes of helping others live easier too.

FOREWORD

I'm a Christian, but I never wrote about the night I cried during the foot-washing just so Dakota would hold me in his embrace, or the night I was baptized in a hot tub, or the night I played my dad's worship song on my violin in the wrong key. I did write about feeling despondent when my grandfather's porch was painted the wrong color, treading over the massacre of worms on the sidewalk, and carving part of my finger off with an X-Acto blade. I believe these stories, even without the Christian motifs, reveal my faith in Christ. As a believer, I see the world through a lens of Christianity; hence, I cannot separate my faith from my writing because my faith informs my observations and conclusions. However, I also believe that I am responsible as a Christian writer to compose prayers, offerings, and proofs of my faith through writing.

Although I am a Christian, I do not need to allude to Biblical stories in my pieces to consider them Christian works. I'm a Christian, and therefore my poetry and nonfiction pieces are Christian. Bret Lott describes this concept in a video interview about being a Christian writer when he states, "...the weave of the story is who I am." I write with an authority and voice that has experienced irresistible grace, and I stitch my belief in a supernatural God in each sentence ("On Letters and Life"). When I write, I am a preacher as Doyle claims since "writers are, deep in their souls, didacts who itch to deliver the Unvarnished Truth and cannot help but unburden themselves of that which burns in their hearts" ("Why Write" xvi). I write to unburden my contemplations on life's ordinary, thrilling, and forbidding moments. Each sentence I compose, each precise word starts unveiling the lesson I'm learning for the first time myself because when I write, I'm looking for the redeeming narrative, the Unvarnished Truth. I write creatively, but truthfully,

because when I expose my real human experiences, readers can not only sympathize, but take away “perspectival truth, consisting of ideas, “which” embody implied ideas and makes implicit truth claims” (Ryken 28). I am a Christian, I understand the world as a Christian, and I live as a Christian. I can’t help but write as a Christian as well.

My Christianity does not negatively affect my writing by urging me to subdue less than righteous subjects. Because I am a Christian, my faith not only affects how I interpret and convey my religious beliefs in my writings, but about my struggles and sin as well (Terrell 253). I will not discourage myself from pursuing subjects like my shortcomings, my sin, my pain, or my fears because through these topics I am able to suggest ideas of heaven, hope, joy, and peace. If I only write that God is good all the time without showing how, without showing that my cat was snuggled in a shoe box with my picture tucked under his paws only after he was euthanized, only after he was jaundice, only after he cried as I stroked his protruding skeleton, then I am not being authentic with my view of reality. Flannery O’Conner states that a “novelist doesn't write about people in a vacuum; he writes about people in a world where something is obviously lacking, where there is the general mystery of incompleteness and the particular tragedy of our own times to be demonstrated.” I must show that people are lacking in this world with depictions of evil in order to demonstrate that longings for beauty, love, and perfection can only be filled by the One who encompasses these. Brian Doyle in his piece *Leap* on the nine-eleven attacks capitalizes on this idea of showing a need for God in the midst of hell:

Their hands reaching and joining are the most powerful prayer I can imagine, the most eloquent, the most graceful. It is everything that we are capable of against horror and loss and death. It is what makes me believe that we are not craven fools

and charlatans to believe in God, to believe that human beings have greatness and holiness within them like seeds that open only under great fires, to believe that some unimaginable essence of who we are persists past the dissolution of what we were, to believe against such evil hourly evidence that love is why we are here.

Although I may or may not include the name of God in my works such as Doyle shows above, I believe that writing images or stories that represent the real, corrupt world will always stir within readers that longing for something more from the story and something more of life. I want to show in my writing's hope as Doyle does, a hope that proves a purpose for our existence.

I'm a Christian, and I use my writing to be "a form of contemplation and a form of prayer" (Doyle xv). It's not natural for me to be introspective; I don't enjoy lying in bed at night and mulling over my actions and words each day, but when I write, I don't have a choice. When I write, I don't speak a prayer, but feel a sense of calm, of being still. I'm not saying that in that moment I sit at the keyboard I'm asking God to help me write. I may have prayed once or twice before writing to ask God to help me finish a poem or essay so I could go to sleep. I should pray before I begin writing that the Lord shows me how to be still—to not be anxious about getting the assignment completed, or fearful that the piece won't meet my arbitrary expectations, or boastful that I have produced a pure sentence—until I am still. I should pray and send my requests to God to help me write a transformative piece, to help me step closer towards glorification, to help others observe His glory. But I don't. What I mean by entering into my prayer is that my heart has entered a pilgrimage. When I write my creative nonfiction and poetry, I look at the stories to find answers, and it's not easy. In the moment, I usually hate writing because of the struggle of peeling back the outer

stories to discover the core truths (Terrell 252). I hate hearing my voice as I write reveal my imperfections, but then I feel grace. I confess in my writings my errors and others to learn from the piece, from that moment of prayer. When I have finished the prayer, the pilgrimage, I feel in the time it takes to sigh, satisfied.

As a Christian, I am to offer all of my writing to God and give Him all the glory. However, I have to make the conscious effort to humble myself. The idea of giving someone else the glory for the work I typed with my own fingers feels unnatural. I know that I am called to “Commit [my] work to the Lord, and [my] plans will be established” (Prov. 16:3), but I’m stubborn and catch myself reverting to committing my work to myself. I credit myself for my works, but I do not deserve the credit. I am simply a depiction of a child grabbing everything in reach and calling it *mine*. Ultimately, the stories and poems I write are based on what I view in the world and history, and God has written all. Perhaps, I could claim that I created the beautiful sentence, but God created the language. Maybe I could state that I developed the clear symbolism, but God painted the image. I know this desire within myself to receive all the praise does not grow from a longing for fame, or reputation, or even publication. I want the glory because I want to feel worthy. However, without Christ, I’m worthy of Hell because I’m not perfect. I long for perfection, but I only obtain it when I search for a faultless Christ. I’m not the storyteller, but an “instrument for [Gods] story just like the typewriter [is mine]” (O’Conner, *Prayer Journal* 11).

Just because I am a Christian writer does not mean that God makes the writing process easy by mystically stroking each key on my keyboard; instead, the struggle of writing suggests proof of my faith. Because I struggle at writing, I doubt. I doubt my ability as a writer, and whether or not I should pursue a story. Lott suggests that Satan is the one

who “stills our fingers over a keyboard when we, with fear and trembling begin to write of our “human attestation” to the role of grace in our lives (“Why Have we Given up the Ghost?” 28). I fear that I will fail to write a piece I feel proud of, I fear that I think I’m a better writer than what I am, I fear that I am not a good writer at all, I fear I have nothing beautiful to add to literature and all of these fears produce a sense of hopelessness.

However, my faith—my belief in a God who redeems—encourages me to pursue writing, to pursue passion as obedience and evidence of my willingness to pursue Christ. Flannery O’Connor tackles the idea of faith and struggle as well in her book *The Habit of Being*:

They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross. It is much harder to believe than not to believe. If you feel you can't believe, you must at least do this: keep an open mind. Keep it open toward faith, keep wanting it, keep asking for it, and leave the rest to God ” (354).

I believe that if I am a good steward of my work and attempt to give readers a sense of place with sensory description, make my sentences beautiful to the ear, keep an open mind about the story I’m writing, and keep pursuing a piece no matter the struggle, then I prove my faith in something greater than myself.

As a believer in Christ, I’m not required to include religious practices in the content of my stories, but I do practice my religious beliefs within the writing process. I want to be real and authentic so believers and non-believers alike can witness my attempts at redeeming the good from evil. I want to be still while I write, pray, and confess. I want to be humble enough to recognize the ultimate narrative the Lord provides and ask Him to help me write smaller bits to assist my finite abilities. I want to write out of obedience to God. I want to feel His pleasure.

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INSIDE THE MUSIC BOX

Fingers curl, reach, and touch the pearl
white, cold slab of spruce covered in ivory—
or perhaps some flesh desire to touch the ebony,
thinner, elevated, stalks.

My own grand Creation of Adam:
tension grows in my extremities and flows
onto the keys, where the pressure relieves,
and the instrument stirs in a grazioso method.

The frame, cast iron—
a silhouette of Lucifer's wings—
the strings' relief of eighteen stressful tons.
Then, the pinblock
embedded steel rods embraced with strands
a hardwood to withstand
such strict and desperate clasps.

It's shell—black iris—
maybe maple, spruce, or sometimes beech,
only feels the thrum of strings strum.

The soundboard, a sitka spruce diaphragm,
three eighths of an inch that amplifies,
string shifts and pure cadence lift.
The plank lays just below, peering up through dust
at the sliver of steel and copper.

The action, beauty's inner mechanics performs
each intricate nuance
from my heartbeat to the music's downbeat.

Wood, paper, felt, buckskin, brass, steel—
each fabric reacts within a thousandth of a second.
My finger presses middle C and the hammer strikes
the note rings, the equipment crescendos.
Then, damper dims decibels, pianissimo, until the coda.

The double bar of silence.

I UNDERSTOOD THE TRINITY BETTER AS A CHILD

*"For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word,
and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one."
—1 John 5:7 (KJV)*

I attached the elastic yo-yo to my finger and watched it stretch towards the ceiling continually. I knew I wasn't supposed to play indoors with the ball, I wasn't supposed to watch the cushy core stretch higher and further.

The stretch snapped. The ball's summit wrecked the glass light cover.

I'm not sure what was more beautiful, the once floral design encrusted on the rippled crystal texture, or its fragmented pieces falling towards my troubled face.

Or was it the littered glass in a semicircle around my feet.

*

The summer sun penetrated the car interior, and my fingers could feel the cherry popsicle dripping down toward my Sunday dress. Following mother's order, my sister and I stuck the popsicles outside our windows.

It looks like flames, my mom laughed, getting out of the car. But my dad couldn't continue to look at the mess and turned away to fill up the bucket. I can still see him scrubbing the streaks of red off the car's exterior, making it white again.

*

I remember the dandelions that summer were flowering in every neighbor's yard. I gathered a full grip's worth of yellow even though I hated the milky substance leaking from

the stems and sticking to my fingers. Finally, I cleared my yard of all the deceitful plants; I raised my bouquet to the sky.

God I picked these for you. Please take them! Take them from my hand! I prayed. And I jumped, twirled, danced, and I lifted my face toward the heat of the mid-afternoon until my thirsty desire overcame my spiritual one.

I was at first disappointed when I returned to the plot of yard I had momentarily set my gift down, now bare. Then, I realized God heard me.

Thank you.

STRINGS ON A STICK AND BODY

The zipper vibratos and reveals
the instrument's varnish,
an hour glass body situated in satin.
The cold polished spruce reflects my tender grasps,
my thumb grips on its purfling edge.

I nestle the body under my chin
and grip the hilt of ebony, fiddling with
steel strings stretched across the anatomy.

I can't revert my stare of the "f" incisions
opening my mind to the single vertebrae,
its soul post.

Rosin and brazilwood kiss the horsehair strands,
pulled tight at the grip's iridescent mark.
It's embrace of the bridge's taunt fibers
puffs white dust and buzzes the pitch.

Crescendo, diminuendo, pianissimo, forte and ritardando.
Each note is an afterthought
as my fingers stroke the neck.

My own neck reveals the hickey of Mozart's Sonata No. 17.

I PRAYED FOR BEAUTY WHEN I WAS FIVE

Flicked on lights highlight my acne-scarred jaw, unplucked brow, and two iridescent scars streaked on the center of my forehead. I open the drawer of cosmetics and reach for beauty; it lingers on the bristles I brush my contoured cheeks with, and it plasters the artificial layer of glowing skin on my pores. It kisses the childish pink of my lips with wet gloss of “Eternal Bliss,” and adorns my eyes with the liquid liner, “Mahogany Flame.” Every time I blink, I present my favorite shadow of “Sin.”

I smell beauty with the daily spritz of vanilla because Cosmopolitan told me it increased my attractiveness. And I can taste beauty in the morning in the Listerine’s mint mouthwash and after meals of 5 Gum’s peppermint cobalt.

I can feel it when my hair is pinned up and the nape of my neck feels the whisper of a chill from the Ohio breeze or in the cold metal chain brushing against my collarbone, expertly exposed in my scoop-neck blouse.

In that moment, I am beautiful.

In that small minute as a child, not quite old enough for school, I sat down with legs crisscrossed and saw myself in the mirror. I saw my baby features still prominent in the dimpled cheeks, the deep blue iris still too large for my face. Hair that lay in pristine curls fashioned by my mother every Saturday night in sponge rolls. And I prayed, “God, please make me beautiful when I grow up.”

DANIEL KRAYNIK'S VIEWING

The line—
 living bodies,
 circle your
dead one.

The father,
 can't stand.
his face,
 refuses
to look—satin in the
burial box.

The mother,
stands—tilts up,
a concrete—abandoned
 structure.

Red,
 eyes—
the sister,
a crutch,
her
 mother's side.

You were
to return—released from
hospital bed,
 but you coughed
up—your life,
written in
dark—
 wet—

heart refused,
 and you went.

DANIELLE KRAYNIK PART I

His body, fractured at the waist, groaning from gravity, decomposing onto the floor—a bundle of deficient limbs. His mouth, open, wrecked the ceremonious silence.

Neck yanked opposite of the ash-colored (or maybe it was cream) casket—his daughter's.

Someone brought him a chair.

DANIELLE KRAYNIK PART II

Grief was the dark circles under their eyes, the crisp line of manic tears dried up on salted cheeks.

Red, white, black, a huddle of numbers and stripes, jerseys, gripping each other. My jersey lay wrinkled in my closet at home, no longer a part of the team.

My old teammates, Lauren Ruschak and Katie Dutt, approached me, embraced me—a tangled mess of pulsing valves. Lauren's tears soaked my shoulder. Katie's staccato breath hissed in my ear.

"Madie, we touched her!"

"I touched her hand."

To stroke a soulless body, I shuddered.

DANIELLE KRAYNIK PART III

The normal pose for a dead girl: toes pointing toward the ceiling, prayerful hands folded on her diaphragm, cheeks elevated so her lips pulled upwards at the corners—dead are forced to smile.

I could see Danielle's scalp exposed beneath the wire of blond hair, beneath the ringlet halo of frayed string.

THE DAISY'S LOT IN LIFE

We, the takers of life,
pluck the pretties of the earth.

We break their necks,
uproot them from their comfort.

Beauty blooms for a time,
displayed in protective, glass encasements.
But restricting the beauty,
only rots the daisies' potential.

White dulls to gray,
and flowers that fail to root themselves,
bend in submission,
hanging over the vase's edge,
or shoulders support one another.

Decaying attraction is useless,
and fallen pedals, brown stems,
trashed by the hand that once treasured.

Resilient,
they'll grow again.

SAN LUCAS, MEXICO—ACROSS THE ARIZONA

The man was short and his legs appeared to be less than able to hold his weight, but he refused to sit. Muffled thumps of his shuffling feet stirred puffs of dirt inches from the ground, and the plastic chairs he dragged indented a trail in the grains of gathered dust. He wanted us to sit.

The dewy layer of sweat trickled down the window of his smile. Crooked and decaying, even his teeth were dirt covered in cavities, but dirt was indistinguishable on his moist brown skin, spotted from hours of sunny, shirtless days.

Beauty felt meek, but inexhaustible. He was the single silver coin lost in a shanty encasement of cardboard cartons and tarp, and I celebrated my find. His droopy flesh a mere binding to a novel anticipating coming wealth.

Smells of grime, decay, and sand mixed with his exhales of sickly breath.

The pools of sweat sat in my armpits, my shirt too damp to absorb more perspiration, and the wall's Styrofoam structure trapped the blaze, but I would never insult a person's humble address.

My eyes followed his tripping approach up to each individual visitor, his grunts and smiles, a language of hello.

Then he faced me, stumbled, *left foot slid then right, then left knee gave way a little but still he stood*. His quivering fingers stretched, crossing the barrier between, and I found myself reaching for him, interlocking my pale hands with his sun-bruised grip, the meshing of two lives.

And there he was. And I was there. A fragment of sweaty fingers touching the outer skin of inner souls, expunging divisions and enforcing family ties.

A RAVEN IS A BIRD

Is the raven only preserved on paper?
Wings clipped by fingers fumbling diction.
You made the raven insincere with its severity,
you who can't tell the difference from a crow.

The raven is not your love's tuft hair,
or its eye the iris in your own dark psyche,
neither is it the king's stately schorl,
or a dozing demon smoldering inside.

The raven is not a presage
of thrashing shadows returning
although it scavenges mangled remains
off boney possessors.

The raven is not a prophet.
It's speech does not reveal the oracles
your Latin influence interprets
of its *cras* crying tomorrow,

or that ancient yesterday
where mystics transcribed the bird's flight
from the dark womb of the cosmos
as bringing forth the day and the light.

The raven is an egg-laying clod with black feathers.

A THUNDERSTORM'S TOTAL ENERGY IS GREATER THAN THE ATOMIC BOMB

I stand in the silhouette of my dad's shadow. And he stands; a casual curve against the wooden trim and boxed in by the doorframe. His gaze holds the electricity of the charged clouds, the friction of air currents rubbing one another. Every exhale fogs the glass door.

My feet pad the white, ceramic tiles flecked with dark specks as I inch towards my father's whisper, *one elephant, two elephant, three elephant*. His voice was a song, but I thought he was singing the wrong words.

I pitied the cherry blossom in the front lawn stripped of leaves and manically brandishing its branches, but quaking with every bellow of thunder.

Mississippi is too long a word, elephant is more precise.

The cumulonimbus fibers ripple in the sky and reflect in our pupils. Two figures scan the woven wisps, anticipating the blast of electricity needling through fabricated sky.

We count the spaces between flare and blast. Divide by five. *That's where the lightning strikes.*

RETURNING TO HOUSE 18

The sign, Janette Circle, points my ride home up the hill.
See the corner house ahead? I'm the one below it.
The cherry blossoms fall in the front yard.
I abandon the car and look into the face
Of windows alight with plastic candles.
The red door opens, and the hallway light
Solidifies the figure, hand hanging on the handle.
Fireflies fill in the space.

REFLECTION IN MY REVIEW MIRROR

In the brick base house number 18, behind blue shutters
and even as I shift to drive Comfort's tears appeal to me,
I can still hear her throat.

Protection stands behind the front door,
framed by the brick, while his hands grip
The lining inside his jean pockets, praying for angels.

And I can't decide which road is right.

But I keep thinking it's the one behind me.

THE SCIURIDAE

I glimpsed this forest, forest's follower, freedom of civil living, spastic-scruff-scrawling Squirrel, in his scurrying preoccupied with precious, provision, and scattered, there, in his groundwork. But

instinct informed of inspection and how his eye turned fierce to my face. Then off, and up, higher, forward—claws sweeping trunk, trouncing tail trailing,

under nook and knot, over Spruce or Ash or Birch's burnt bark. Steps just touched, then stops— what trusted talent, movement moves to air, flight, for seconds. Then leaf, twig, branch, and react.

Implausible creature: small gesture creates carefully crafted retort, and dusted fur blur the vision, then stiff pause, before motion motivates again.

PRINTINGMAKING

Skin's sebaceous glands form residue and every touch leaves a fingerprint. My mother cringes at my repeated signature over the glass door.

Three distinct features create custom friction ridges: arches, loops, and whorls—your own womb story.

Identical twins don't have identical fingerprints.

In the fetus, the basal layer of skin grows faster than the other layers, the outer epidermis and inner dermis. The fetus touches the womb, and the skin layers buckle, fold, wave, wrinkle, dip, uplift, all in smooth directions forcing formation of complex shapes.

Nature's soft fingerprint, Sahara's dunes, rippled sand.

Air, water, dust particles, and molecules form the sky's fingerprints: cirrostratus.

Once, we pressed our fingers into the ink. Rock the finger one time from left edge of nail bed to right, a trail of black impressions barely remembered in the twenty-four sensory branches of fingerprint's surface. Gentle release to avoid smudge. The art of dactyloscopy.

Ocean's wave curls, whirls, the pristine arch imitated on your dry fingers, but the liquid saturates your skin, furrows the surface, and distorts your own original arch's beauty.

My left ring finger resembles a topographic map of Cranberry and Tea Creek at the Monongahela National Forest, but I've never been there.

I saw the sliver of my finger next to the drops of blood pulsing from the small hole I created in myself—capillaries throbbing at the exposure. I hate the sound of X-Acto blades scraping against metal guides, cutting through paper. No sound is made when blade penetrates through flesh.

I didn't make a sound when I cut you from my life. Only the memory of our finger's elevated creases connecting, the imprint of your lips pressing mine—the question of a possible red mark of your incensed hand on my cheek, the exposure of your black impression when you formed my new pet name, *bitch*.

No prints are ever the same.

THE SINNER'S PRAYER

Elect me—decayed wedge of afflicted sycamore—
and firmly as my prayerful clutch,
clamp my core to Your workbench.
I am too splintered
not to wince.

Exert Your flush cut saw and
grate my bark flesh. Though I fear
Your rasp's coarse abrasion.

As the burin burrows and penetrates
my pith, thrust Your beveled gouge
and cleave the guilty grains.

Chisel my warped
spine and file the riffler against
my crude surface until I am worthy
to be worked into Your chair.
I pray to uphold You.

Forgive me.

*FLEEING QUARAKOSH

Artillery rounds,
guided missiles.

Children,
twelve and five, as well as ten,

a game involving a tin can,
and fleeing after the kicked metal's *ping*.

Ping.

A shell exploded—

one arm, one leg,
collected in a Nylon bag.

Sepia blood clumps with dirt,
and sticks to your soles.

Run.

*An edited found poem from the following original source.
Gady, Franz-Stefan. "Fleeing Quarakosh: The Last Christians in Iraq." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 01
Sept. 2014. Web. 14 Nov. 2014. Web.

HUNGER PAINS

A crust eaten in peace is better than a banquet partaken in anxiety.
—Aesop

I wish to start with the eyes of hungry children, restricted from second helpings to cover their skeleton forms. Their mouths dry. Their clothes dirt-covered. Standing by the window to swallow the falling food, like I did as a child catching snowflakes, but they open up to burnt rice.

I wish to open the heavy, cold, metal entrance, a child's white eyes pleading in that small space between the cement floor and door edge. His dark skin wet with sweat, dripping with exhaustion, pain, longing, maybe even tears. His mouth was like a cave, abyss, desert. His fingers crossing the barrier, where rice lay, fallen, soiled, out of reach. And there, at my feet, a plate of rice and meat, a banquet.

I wish to escape through those doors and hold that child. The man on guard accepts my decision and opens the gate. There were hundreds. Children—fed, but not satisfied. Sitting along the wall for shade, saving scraps of their lunch to take home. Their siblings couldn't make it today.

I wish to take note of all the voices I heard saying “*dlo*.” Young voices, innocent sounding, like a song. Singing of their desire, their need, necessity. *Water, water, water.*

I wish to see the girl that clung to my side and shared her stench of stale sweat and grime with my scrubbed body. She never smiled. Clinging to my side even though it made us both hotter, she lingered there, an accessory, a rag doll. Her stomach hurt her too, and she lifted her pale blue shirt but just barely because it was already too small for her. She was scarred, and it looked raw, a raised maze, her black skin was burnt to an intestinal pink and yellowing white. I ran for the doctor, but it was too long since the boiling oil touched her. I was scolded for running from the main group, seeking aid. There was nothing to be done.

I wish to feel the younger boy’s arm link with mine as he walked me back to the compound from the church, his steps reaching to match my stride. My white skin glowed in comparison to his soiled, black skin. We were backwards—my arm supported his, which was threaded through the gap between my bent limb and side. He was no less the gentleman.

I wish to have thought to bring extra toothpaste, toothbrushes, combs, hair ties, ribbons, socks, and such to give away to the young women on the compound, instead of seeing them sift through the trash, lifting and inspecting the overlooked treasures, and pocketing the used toothbrushes, ripped bandanas, molding soap containers for keeping.

I wish to hear the youngest sing “Jesus Loves the Little Children” in their Créole language, while I sing in English. Their teeth showing with each syllable, a smile.

I wish to forget my last day. The young men gripping my soccer jersey, tearing it from my body. The little boys trying to untie my shoelaces and take my cleats. One of the male chaperones grabbing me and placing me in the back of a truck with other girls who were being surrounded, told us to get back to the pastor’s compound. The words *give me, give me, give me* ringing in my ears the whole way back.

INSIDE MAKESHIFT WALLS IN SAN LUCAS, MEXICO

Creature or human?
You were a prostrate form,
too feeble to twist
and face me.

I stepped over
your bags of soiled underpants,
and watched your sharp noise shift
while your mouth muscles twitched
inaudible words.

I flex at the sight of your coiled grip,
fingers like choking vines
and arm the shriveled leaf,
of the dehydrated amaryllis

Do Christ's pierced palms ache too?

CONSECRATING FRIENDSHIP

After hello, a tingling warmth releases from the chest—
The pupils widen joyfully, like a growing grin.
The brain rejoices and thinks you've arrived,
Standing united, the memories are revived.

The arms, synchronized, reach out
Into air, then body, then spirit—
Taught from infancy,
And forever known,
A tree's display of resurgence, budded and grown.

This is the moment of breath—
A vital renewing,
As empty persons, seek the dawn—
First—Stun—then passion—then the holding on.

SHOW DON'T TELL

There is the space where the ceiling attaches to the dry wall and the corner that the swindler spins her web.

below, the window's frame

There, just

where my mother places her collected blue glass.

And outside there, the hummingbird,

a perched display of green and red.

There, the porch chair with my grandfather's past presence slumped in the material.

There is

and there is not.

DEEP CREEK LAKE

Boat wakes rock the docks,
extensions of land for those who lack the capacity
to float, and sit pretty on the muddy marine.
All the stones on the shore
are broken, as cracked as my grandmother's heels.
But the small pleasure of pocketing a smoothed piece of glass
is better than finding the perfect rock to skip—
rounded edges, with a certain heft to it.

It's a "we do the best we can with what we know at the time"
breeze that bothers the one-room, one-rocker cabin. But
there's no air conditioning so we have to keep the screens down.

We save on water by bathing in the lake,
a mixture of mud, seaweed, gasoline, and pee.

6 TRANSFORMATIONS OF MY GRANDMOTHER'S LARYNGECTOMY

1. I can't remember the tone of Grandma's voice threatening her teasing husband with his name, *Donald!* The only noises I can recall are the sound of her walker wheeling away, first hallow, a bass on the hardwood floor, then dimmed with carpet or rug damper, her withdrawal to the recliner.

The repeated rhythm I hear every visit.

2. She reaches for her blistering red neck where the radiation has penetrated her larynx. At dinner, each spoonful of crab bisque is a burning reminder to her throat of each singed cigarette.

Later, her hush hiss, *It hurts to talk.*

Nodding is a nonverbal language.

3. After the laryngectomy, my mother told me before the first time I heard my grandmother, "She sounds like she's talking through a burp."

I walk in my family room and view my grandmother's swollen jaw, her eyes beginning to tear up, and the inside of her throat through the small hole. To speak, she covers the opening, and breaths out to say no more than three words at once, but it sounds like the garbage disposal grinding her barely eaten meals.

This is no (gasp) way to live.

4. I stare at the penny size cut out in her throat considering if she'll be embarrassed again if I tell her the scarf has fallen.

She turns and grunts something to me but I can't understand. Then, only scratches of her pen etching the yellow notepad to explain.

5. My grandmother's lips smack together, soft little tufts and higher tones of little puffs, and the sound of saliva stirring around her tongue as she mouths: *I wish I were dead.*

6. The walls are drums, and her 12 intermitted thumps to the house frame wake me up in the morning. I pull myself into a sitting position before the sound of her walker on the burgundy carpet crescendos to outside my bedroom. The door jingles like the bell she uses to call when she comes to our house. She peers in, smiles, and I interpret the movements of her mouth: *I made you breakfast.*

I follow her to the kitchen. She points towards two bowls and a box of Cheerios on the table. She watches me pour our meal, the pitter-patter of small, but wholesome things dropping into a ceramic bowl.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE EXTENDED FAMILY REUNION AT CHRISTMASTIME

Maryland and New York, out West, down South,
the bond of my family like the bond of my memory,
wary and hesitant yet enduring, accustomed
to the conducts of intimacy and connection, lost.

Lost the shared traditions, the piccolo's
piping, Christmas spirit in the round tablecloths,
scooping only the sherbet from the punch.
Faces feel foreign and blur in my suspicious vision,

Like terrain through the car's window
streaking and blending the road signs
into the corn stalks and wintergreens.

Extended family is an eighty-six chapter book
shelved next to "Belly Dancing," "The West Virginia Hick," "Amish,"
"Grandpa and Uncle Wayne Debate God and Government"
with some of the pages torn out.

I ASK MYSELF, SELF, WHO ARE YOU?

I was named Madison after the mermaid in the 1984 movie Splash, but I have yet to find time and watch the film.

Once, I accidentally told everyone how much I love scarves. I have a collection of 53. I wear about 7 of them.

I only have 20/200 vision out of my left eye. Sometimes, I think I should have pursued a degree other than graphic design in case something happens to my right eye. Please don't stand on my blind side.

I'm missing part of my fingerprint on my left index finger. I hate the sound of X-Acto blades.

I call myself a compassionate person, but I never remember to tithe.

What is your favorite animal? Polar bear. *Why?* They have a great sense of white space.

People keep telling me that my fear of dinosaurs is irrational.

I'm thinking about getting my license to carry. And it's only because I want to say I have a license to carry.

I try to give myself small, achievable goals in life. Today, I want to understand why.

DEEP CREEK LAKE

The name flows from my tongue like a pitch to a song. Every other summer I'm home: mosquitos and spiders and wasps and crickets and hummingbirds and squirrels. Damp and rotting trees, the smells of a half eaten fish left on the chipped rock shore for my dog to find later.

I've flirted with the waters. Should I let its clouded murk absorb into my pores and replace the salt that drips off the nape of my neck? I know better than to be a tease. Stay clear of the waves' bone-tickling spray, or just jump with the wooden dock as an afterthought. Allow the brown liquid to swallow the warmth with its icy, enticing breath that vigor barely felt.

Hazlehurst Lane, where Nick McGettigan may have held an extended second of my youthfulness. I may have given his muscles a thought, no more than two, and nothing more than a smile after returning for years.

Wafts of bacon from BLT sandwiches I never ate and opted for just toast and the farmer's market blackberry jam. Chill of putting on damp bathing suits that never dried on the clothesline, skiing on glass with a sunrise, a sunset. Echoes of my cousins, Matt, Jacob, Monica, touching the three surfaces of the inlet and disappearing into the grind of boat engines. Our voices fail to echo, a loss, an innocence.

The waves from passing boats rock me in the Crownline, and pull me under the surface of awareness. It's quiet now. I can't hear the barks of Gabriel, the slapping of boat wakes against the plank-wood walkway, the constant *can we go for a boat ride?*

The porch my Grandfather built with his father is painted the wrong color now. My grandmother cried when she saw it. She wanted to call the "other" family and complain. My mother got her to settle down. I hate it too—it's purple.

I love campfires. Burning bark brings people together, unifies them in a circle, a line that has no beginning and no end, but fires last only for so long.

It's time to go home.

LOVE CALLS THE FUTURISTS TO THINGS OF SPEED

The ears attune to the pulse of pistons.
And energized by the ignition, the mechanism hums,
exhaling her fumes.

In the belly where machine swallows man,
the human tool hovers his foot over the metal slab.

She's black leather, clean carpet, and fresh inside,
bumper, fenders, hood and armored outside.

As the man presses the pedal, she rolls her infinite arch—
a tread-covered sole—inches forward,
the rubber digs into tar, jerks, stops, repeat.

Seated in its chest, mankind pumps life throughout her body,
steering the vehicle as she desires, telling the spine which way to twist,
veer, angle, and turn.

While the spirit sings

“Now lives the day of Progression and Industry!
Pray that oil and grime be found beneath our fingernails,
and the ground be re-earthed with asphalt.”

DEATH ON MY SIDEWALK ROUTE TO ART HISTORY

Walking in the rain I found a worm,
compressed to a shadow, in the middle of the sidewalk.
I wondered whether his life mattered,
this early in the morning, before the clouds' gray hues
tinted with the rising, masked sun.

I formulated Life's question several more times.
Picking my footing, but not so seriously
as to permit tardiness, I best attempted to
avoid the survivors of the floating grass.
righteous temptation urged me to pocket one.

But I couldn't ignore the crushed aortic arches,
the feeling of my foot deflating a once wriggling tube.
How thankful I am to be deaf to their gurgling respiratory,
their suffocating, wheezing, their silent acceptance
of drowning in the levee between concrete slabs.

The massacre plastered into the grainy cement,
a work to commemorate the night crawler.

THE QUIET DORM ROOM OF WILLETTS 238 BECAUSE I KNOW SHE IS LYING TO ME

Click, click.

The room's suppressor doesn't dim
other's laughter seeping through concrete blocks
painted white. In our space,
lights remain off. The sun's sufficient
reaching through closed blinds.

On the floor, the carpet fibers
press into my legs and produce artificial dimples.
I can feel the weight of gravity at this bowed level.

She reclines in her bed, rubs her thumb
across her lips, cocked on a thought and waits
for the trigger to complete her conclusion.

Her iris reflect the computer's glare,
demonstrate the poise—straight and constant—
unlike her clip filled with rounds of mumbled lies,
and flickering eyes.

I thought we had an understanding.

Click, click

ULNAR COLLATERAL SURGERY OR HE CALLS HIS RIGHT ARM TOMMY
OR I WATCHED THEM DRILL HOLES IN HIS ELBOW

Garrett's mom and I followed the viewing room tenant into a small, dim lit space occupied with a couch, chair, and mounted flat screen. The room felt spacious, one wall a window to the operating room. My boyfriend was on the table.

"Why are you being so quiet?"

"I just don't have anything to say."

"We haven't talked in a while though."

"Well, you haven't been that much fun recently."

I'll try to be better.

I couldn't see Garrett, the barrier of green scrubs obstructed my view, but I could clearly see Dr. Kremchek's left hand carve a small incision below his wrist on the flat screen. I saw the doctor cut the palmaris longus tendon from his inside forearm and pull the blood-covered strand into the sterile room. I saw the assistant bring the individual slice to a separate station to prep the graft. I saw them scrape the velvet clots from the silky, white strand, saw them attach each end to metal clamps, saw them stretch the lace to look like the ligament it was replacing.

"Do you feel this tension between us?"

"I've just been really busy with school and baseball. This is the first year I'm really taking my future seriously."

Your future.

I watched them cut a crescent form into his elbow, pierce the layers of skin, slice open the fibrous muscle that wouldn't fully heal for a year. I watched them scrape out the scar tissue, sever the ligament from its useless attachment. I heard the heart monitor continuously thump on the machine whose mass of extending wires resembled Garrett's inner forearm. I heard the pulses of the long drill as it penetrated the humerus bone.

I approached him after the game. He was wearing the same expression as soon as he threw that first wild pitch, as soon as the microscopic trauma of each throw ended with a snap of his ulnar collateral ligament.

"I brought my car, do you need to go to the hospital now?"

"I made a doctor's appointment for 8:20 tomorrow morning. But can I use your car tomorrow?"

"Sure, but I can drive you."

"Jordan's taking me. It might be awkward if you come."

Yeah, sure. Take my car.

How beautiful it was to watch them take the tendon and thread a figure eight through the two holes in your marrow. What a beautiful infinity mark it made in your joint, beneath the rewoven muscle, beneath the stitched skin that will always remember the scar.

"Can I come to the surgery tomorrow?"

"I don't care. But, it's not like I'm gonna be up to doing much tomorrow."

"That's fine, I just want to be there."

I just want you to want me