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## To Ride On

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To Ride On

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

by

Coleen Muir

B.A. University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 2007

August, 2012

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## Table of Contents

Gods Come Down .....	1
Apprentices .....	3
Hay Bales .....	4
Twitch .....	6
Calf Chase .....	8
Us Three .....	11
The Woe That if Marriage .....	12
Birth .....	18
Reception .....	15
Who She Was .....	20
Sunburn .....	21
Held Together .....	22
As Much As You Can Hold .....	23
Hamburger Helper .....	35
The Divide .....	31
Myths .....	32
How to Clean a Horse .....	38
Riding Lawn Mower .....	40
Windshields .....	41
Folgers Instant .....	42
New Lawn Mower .....	43
Work-related Accident .....	45

Phone Call .....	46
First Sight .....	47
Father in Heaven .....	48
Disabled .....	52
Fingers .....	53
Stains Lifting .....	54
Bending, Searching .....	55
Infestation .....	60
The Great Weight of Her .....	66
Home .....	82
Employment Security Commission .....	87
Take it Back .....	90
Ice Cream .....	94
Recall .....	95
What to do .....	96
Shot .....	97
Shorn .....	98
Diane's Diner .....	99
Porch Talk .....	103
Approximation of Mom's Monthly Budget .....	105
Dead Horses .....	108
Dust .....	112
First Horse .....	113

Light Source .....	115
Where the Sidewalk Ends .....	118
Accent .....	119
Picture of Mother .....	121
Dishes .....	122
Vultures .....	128
Feral .....	131
Pile Up .....	133
Always on Repeat .....	134
Across the Way .....	135
Red Fox .....	137
Disaster Plan .....	138
Bedtime .....	141
Family Portrait .....	143
As Close As We Can Get .....	147
Mermaids .....	150
Honeysuckles .....	151
Her and Her Horses .....	152
Return to the Rodeo .....	153
Vita.....	161

## Preface

"Given its genre mingling, the lyric essay often accretes by fragments, taking shape mosaically – its import visible only when one stands back and sees it whole. The stories it tells may be no more than metaphors. Or, storyless, it may spiral in on itself, circling the core of a single image or idea, without climax, without a paraphrasable theme."

"New Terrain: The Lyric Essay"

*Seneca Review*, 1997

- Deborah Tall

Early into my fall 2011 semester, I encountered Mary Ruefle's short collection of lyric essays titled, "The Most of It." In this collection, Ruefle combines poetry, philosophy, speculation and meditation in her short, lyrical essays, essays that lack any trajectory, any larger "points." It was her language, and her brevity, that hooked me. From there, I encountered Lia Purpura and Peggy Shumaker, two other champions of the lyric essay. Nick Flynn, one of my literary heroes for many years, was also doing something similar in his memoir, "Another Bullshit Night in Suck City." Writing short, lyrical vignettes that accrued to a whole. Playing with form. Perspective. Asking the reader to make connections.

I fell madly in love with the lyric essay and switched my major from fiction to nonfiction, hoping to create a work that also used language, collage, and vignette as a way to drive the narrative. The language of the pieces was as important to me as what I

was writing about – as it should be for all writers, I suspect. I wanted the reader to experience essays (vignettes? blips of time?) not through exposition, but through syntax, or tone, that spoke to the essay's content (I think that's one of the aims of the lyric essay – hitting an emotional truth through recreating, via particular attention to language, how the experience *felt* to the writer.). And perhaps not all the essays in this collection should be considered "lyric," but I think they all have lyrical qualities. The essays skip ahead, circle around, merge, butt, and comment upon each other. The hope is, by the end, the pieces come together to give the reader a broader experience of what it *felt* like for these characters to be living, to be alive.

- C.M.



## The Gods Come Down

(1989)

Spotlights attached to wooden poles light the arena up. Gnats bumble around in hoards. There is the smell of porta-johns, cigarettes, horse shit, and food. Fans line up at food tents while children grip table edges, their fathers unpeeling greenbacks from their wallets. Nachos are handed out, smothered with cheese, rattling in plastic trays. Mom buys Dee and me each our own bag of cotton candy and we head for the bleachers. I pull tuft after tuft of the spun sugar and let it dissolve to a grain on my tongue. By the time we sit down, my mouth is blue.

A wooden corral sits in the center of this field like the skeleton of something picked clean by buzzards. Fans scramble up metal bleachers, purses and sodas in hand, trying to find places to settle. We lean forward and rest our hands on our knees to watch, having driven along thin country roads, past blocks of fields, counting change for concessions to make it to this. We think about the riders out there now, beyond the glow of the arena, moving in and out of the darkness, imagining them to be like Gods come down to earth.

When they come riding in, they are what we imagine grace and beauty to be like. Steel-tipped boots, eagles branded into leather chaps, cuffs starched stiffer than bones. Bits, belt buckles and bolo ties sparkle through the arena. Horses ripple with light. An American flag waves from a pole that one rider carries. The men are handsome, the women, beautiful. Slim. Faces glittering with powder and gloss. Hair bounces on their

shoulders, catches the light in waves. They ride circles in the arena, showing themselves to us before the competitions begin. They smile and they wave.

We watch them, scratch our heads and wonder how in the hell they make it look so easy. They are perfection. Those smiles. That shine. Cuff links made of real onyx. Boots from the skin of snakes. And their horses, worth more than the pickups most of us rode in on.

Mom's eyes follow them, and sometimes she lets out a breath, says, "Look at that one horse there, girls." Dee and I watch, blue-lipped, fingers sticky, our bags already near empty. Red dust rises up as the Gods make their final lap. They wave at us one last time before turning tail and heading out. We shift in the stands. We applaud. Goodbye, our hearts cry out.

## Apprentices

Mom never got to be in the rodeo, so Dee and I became her next closest shots.

She bought us horses, one at a time, gathering them half a mile down the road in a neighbor's pasture, a pasture that she and Dad tamed themselves. Dad borrowed a bush hog that could chew up anything and spit it out in clips sharp enough to cut skin. We pulled weeds from fences, replaced old wire with new, made a swinging gate to move horses and machinery through, ourselves walking in gnat clouds, dusk every night stuck to our skin. The neighbor owned peacocks, and in the mornings and early evenings, we could hear them screaming down the road.

Dee took right away to riding. Was a natural, fearless in the saddle. Willing to canter, willing to run. I trotted mostly, too afraid to let the reigns loose and go. Mom stood on the ground, calling out, "Kick with your heels," "Pull the reigns in," "You're in control, not the horse." But it never felt that way to me. I could feel the bulk of a body moving beneath mine, could sense at any moment sudden descent. I'd heard Mom and a friend talk of a rider who'd been bucked off, whose foot had remained caught in the stirrup as the horse had kept running, dragging the rider to her death. Out of Mom's gaze, farther into the pasture, where the trees rustled right up against the barbwire, I let my feet loose of the stirrups and let the horse take me where it pleased. My heart beat louder, faster, on a horse, and all I wanted was to be back on my own two feet, sure of where I was going, knowing nothing could throw me when I stood.

## Hay bales

The problem with Mom was, she was fat. Too fat for blue jeans, too fat to slip her calves into cowboy boots, and too fat for the rodeo. She had a friend, Rachel, who was a roper, whose husband, Dale, was a bull rider. Both trim, they rode in competitions, always winning ribbons and medals to show for themselves. Dale, tall as the sky, with a red handlebar moustache and a voice that only came out in thoughtful, quiet grunts, raised cattle that he sold at auction. Rachel trained barrel racers, had a field of horses that she also rode for leisure. Nice horses. Not ones that were old, fat, skittish, or generally unwanted, like the ones we had, offered to Mom at low prices or else free. Not the ideal, but good enough for Mom to ride through the country, good enough to give her the fix she needed.

Rachel sometimes babysat me and Dee. I remember her barn was as big as our house, cut into stables, a tack room, a room for bales of hay stacked nearly to the rafters. She'd have Dee and me scoop manure out of stalls and pile it into wheelbarrows, push them up to the gardens surrounding her home and scatter the clumps amongst the flowers. When chores were done, Dee and I would go back to the barn while Rachel groomed her expensive horses, listening to classical music (I'd never known a person to listen to classical music – Mom listened to her oldies, mostly, or else gospel or Randy Travis). Dee and I would go to the hay bales, climb through the loose bricks of prickling straw, fearing the higher we went, the greater chance of collapse would be, that the bales would break free of their stacks and spread out, swallowing us. Once at the top, we could sit on the bales and stare down at Rachel, the horses, the dust floor of the barn and the small

radio set on a rafter, billowing music strange and exotic to us. Later, we would slide our bodies back down the hay bales, each step loose, never grounded, and emerge from the barn into the sunlight, examining the red welts on our arms and legs, the stuff of straw resisting our skin.

## Twitch

"If applied to the nose, twitches are thought to cause endorphin release, thereby suppressing the pain in the horse."

*Restraint and Handling for Veterinary Technicians and Assistant*

Bonnie Ballard and Jody Rockett

I am in a barn that belongs to my mother's friend, Rachel. She is shoeing a horse that is tied to a stall. For some reason, the horse is "acting out." Stomping his foot. Turning his head to watch her. Side stepping toward the stables, tail swishing. She doesn't have patience for animals that won't listen, that get nervous or spooked. She stands, walks to her tack room, and comes back out with a metal instrument called a twitch. It is a long instrument that resembles pliers, but the nose forms a small O which is meant for the skin of the horse's nose to be pulled through and clamped down upon.

The twitch's long, thin handles spread open in her hands. The horse starts to back away, but is brought to attention by Rachel's firm yank on his halter. She grabs a handful the horse's soft nose, brings it through the opened clamp, and squeezes the legs of the twitch until they nearly touch.

The horse's eyes open up from the pain as its skin balloons out through the O, taking the shape of something else, maybe a plum, something that seems separate from the horse, something that certainly no longer resembles a nose.

Rachel hands the legs of the twitch to me and tells me to hold on to him while she finishes shoeing. As she walks around me, she assures me that the twitch doesn't hurt the horse, that it only keeps the horse still.

I stand in front of the horse, looking straight up into his wide black eyes, his nose like a tumor balanced on the clamp of the twitch. I want to believe it doesn't hurt, but even at twelve, I can't buy the logic that adults give – that animals don't feel pain the way humans do, that they don't suffer. Boot-heels and spurs kicked hard into ribs. The snapping whips on hind quarters. The bits forced under their tongues for hours and hours on end. None of this hurts the animal.

Muscles flinching, eyes watering, we stand stock still. Neither the horse nor I can move. The twitch holds us in place.

## Calf Chase

A clown enters the rodeo corral, dressed in baggy jeans held up by blue suspenders over a white t-shirt. Skin shows through his face paint, smeared by sweat, and next to the smile-lines painted on in black, a bulge of tobacco lifts up. He swings his microphone cord like a lasso, hee-haws, and, with the crowd amped up, announces the first event of the night. "We're gonna have ourselves a calf-chase to start things up. That means all you kids, get in here."

Dee and I are swept up in it, giving in without thought to Mom's fingers on our backs, nudging us forward, saying, "Go on." We take giant steps down the bleachers and crawl between the corral's wooden posts, gather with other kids towards the center. Dozens of kids, some little, toddlers, picking up handfuls of dirt and throwing them up in the air, and some older, almost too old for this sort of thing, tenuous teenage boys, stretching their arms, smirking at each other. Dee and I fall in the middle, sharing fewer years between us than you could count on both hands.

The clown turns off his microphone and comes at us, a grin on his face. More man than clown, whiskers prickle out through his face paint. A dozen calves are penned up behind him, their narrow backs visible between the metal slates of a gate, their dusty hooves lifting and lowering, kicking up dust. The spotlights are hot, blinding.

The clown bends down, hands above knees. "Ya'll come closer so you can hear this."

It's too late to run back to the bleachers. The humiliation of slinking out of the crowd would be more painful, I think, than being run over by a small cow, everyone's



eyes on me chickening out. I step forward, away from Dee, who stays where she's at, staring at her feet.

"Now when I count to three," the clown begins, then turns and points at the calves, "them calves are gonna come out of that pen there. And there's one of them with a yellow ribbon tied to its tail. Now the kid who brings me that ribbon wins." He steps back, holds up his hand, and raises a finger with every number. "One. . . Two. . . "

At three, the gate swings open and the calves soar through, stumbling, knocking, then spreading out along the sides of the corral. The children scatter, spotting the ribbon that's been tied to the tail of a rickety black calf. My eye catches the ribbon quickly, and suddenly, amazingly, my fear leaves me. I want that ribbon. I want it, even more than the twelve-year-old boys want it. I want it because I think I can catch it, and there's a part of me that wants the world to see that I can.

I leave Dee standing where she is and head into the mass of children and animals, the smell of shit and fur, the strings of drool. I can see myself now, this little, chubby blonde girl, dressed in cotton sweat pants and a t-shirt, fists clenched, head down, running hard for the prize, thinking myself as fast as the wind even as the calves and children rush past me, unaware.

The younger kids are quickest to fall, remain on the ground like injured soldiers, grabbing limbs, groaning. The calves pile-up against the arena, approached from the front and from the back by herds of flailing, hollering kids. The yellow ribbon dances like a flame in the center of it all. One boy lunges for it, and for half a second, everything stops. When we see his hand still empty, the ribbon still flickering, we take off again. The calves re-organize, sweep around him, run forward. They break around us

like a wave. The ribboned calf runs right past me, so close I just have to reach out to touch it. I throw myself at him, but the cow brushes against me, hard, and I fall into the dirt. Then there's just the red dust on the ground.

Then I'm aware of the audience's laughter, their hoots and hollers, their sparse applause. I look up and see the children streaming back through the corral's slates, rejoining their parents in the audience, brushing off the dust. Then I see one of the older boys waving the ribbon in the corral's center, the clown standing next to him, saying, "We got ourselves a winner."

I don't remember standing or walking back, though I can see myself pushing up, wiping the mud off my knees and feeling embarrassed. Wondering why I ever thought I could catch the ribbon anyway. Dee never went for it. She just stood there the whole time, watching. Not a speck of dirt on her. What a stupid thing, I think the rest of the night, picking at the dirt rubbed into my clothes.

### Us Three

There is a picture of me, from when I was around ten years old, sitting on a large, black horse, wearing white shorts and a black t-shirt with puff-paint stars, my hair pulled back in a ponytail, my face, arms, stomach, legs – all pudgy. Dee is in the picture too, sitting on a brown gelding, her hair frizzy from an attempted perm, her glasses large and plastic, just like Mom's. Mom is somewhere outside of the picture, sitting on a mare, her body filling the saddle and then some, her brown eyes shining behind her thick, peach-framed glasses as she watches her girls and thinks about barrel racing and cow roping, how to get them to love horses as much as she does, how to turn them into rodeo riders. She dreams of the day we will go spinning around barrels, our blonde hair lifting behind us, while she stands outside the arena, the red dirt we kick up floating through the air and coming to rest on her skin.

## The Woe that is Marriage

"You were an accident," Mom always says to Dee, and then to me, "You were, too. It's your father's fault, taking advantage of me when I was still young and innocent. . ."

Even though she's kidding, it's a phrase I've heard all my life. Mom got knocked up in the back seat of Dad's Subaru on their third or fourth date. She was twenty-one and he was thirty. They married months later, Mom resting her flower bouquet on her pregnant belly in most of the pictures, Dad and his brothers dressed in pale blue tuxedos, leaning in towards Mom, smiling.

I've always viewed marriage as a mistake one ends up in, pregnancy as an unwanted surprise. That's how Mom viewed her situation, I believe. Holes you can't dig your way out of. Things weren't supposed to happen this way for her, one accident, Dee, followed by another the next year, me.

Depressed, she started eating and didn't stop, gained a hundred pounds in those first few years. I don't believe Dad cared that she gained all that weight, either. Already married and divorced, with two other kids living half-way across country, he settled on the idea of doing the right thing, on being in it for the long-haul. Bent on being content, he let Mom's unhappiness flow over him, as easy as water flowing down a river bed.

## Birth, 1982

I weighed 12 lbs and 4oz when I was born.

The largest baby ever born in that Oil City hospital, the biggest baby that the doctor had ever delivered. Like a flesh-colored watermelon with a mouth that could scream and fists that could punch. Mom had me natural, no drugs. "It was something," she says, eyes wide. Dad couldn't handle the screaming, had to stand outside. When they weighed me, Dad watched, looking through a glass window, proud, according to Mom, of his whopper of a little girl. Even more proud when I, naked and pink and shining, rolled over on the scale, unexpectantly, a strong feat for a new-born, another first for the doctors and nurses handling us that day.

Mom tells me the story of the time she went grocery shopping, eight months pregnant with me, her stomach rolling out and back into her like the hill of a roller coaster.

"They were afraid I'd go into labor right there in the store," she says, laughing. "They had me sit down and make them a list, and one of the clerks went and got my groceries for me."

I smile. She shakes her head, pulls her glasses down her nose and looks at me, amused.

"You," she says, "were huge."

Mom and Dad lived in a trailer in a field out behind my great-aunt Beulah's farm house set in the Amish country of Pennsylvania. Dee, a year and half old, was asleep that

morning, a thin blanket covering her pea-pod body, freckles already showing on her cheeks. Outside, snow was falling lightly through the black sky, coming to a rest on the tin roofs of grain silos, the bare branches of rose bushes, the barely-visible road Dad had just set out on, coffee mug between his knees, the time on the clock somewhere after five in the morning. Mom lay in bed, I curled inside of her, both our hearts beating as her water broke, slipping away from us. Dad, clear of the trailer for fifteen minutes, pulled to the side of the road, did a U-turn, and headed back for home. He walked in and found Mom going into labor, thinking she'd have to walk herself through the snow to Beulah's house for help. Dad went and got Aunt Beulah, who came over, white-haired and ever-trembling from Parkinson's. She stayed at the trailer to watch Dee while Dad and Mom set off for the hospital.

"He just somehow knew to come back," Mom says of Dad that morning. "And thank God he did. I don't know what I'd have done if he hadn't. But he knew. Somehow, your father knew."

## Reception, 1980

Here are some accounts my Aunt Joyce's wedding, and the reception, that occurred in 1980. Mom, eight months pregnant with Dee, was just getting to know the other side of her new family. This was not the introduction she had anticipated.

Dad's:

*Your Aunt Joyce met this guy named Bub – and he was a Bub. Ugly, dumb, alcoholic. But he had money. He worked on a ship, hauling iron over Lake Eerie. He only had to sit there and watch a pressure gauge or something. He was gone a lot of the summer and home most of the winter, and so it worked out good for her. She only had to see him half the year. And so anyhow, Joyce got an apartment down the road from us. Me and your mother were sitting there one day, and Joyce came up and said, Hey, I need someone to witness a wedding. And so we went over and there's a regular guy, a preacher, there. We went in and Bub and her was there and they got married in their kitchen. All of us in our regular clothes. I had my work clothes on.*

*A month later, they had a reception. They had a lot of booze. Your mother was carrying Dee, about a month before Dee was born. Everyone got kinda wasted. These people broke into the party and everyone got into a fight. Someone was beating your Uncle John up. Your mother took a broom and bent a handle around the guy. John had to go to the hospital. They broke a big jar of mustard. There was mustard all over the place. Uncle Denny got into a fight with someone over the mustard. It was a mess. The party was at a civic center or something.*

*After the divorce, Joyce got all his money and bought a trailer and put it on the farm out there. Bub took the notion to buy a columbine and go out West with it.*

*Columbine wheat, follow the wheat crop.*

Dad's Sister, Aunt Charlotte's:

*Bub was a merchant marine because he was out on the lakes a lot. He wasn't really stupid. He was smart to do that kind of job, but you know how some people don't have everything together; he didn't have everything together. He made very good money. He made a really good income. And at that time, Joyce had children at home and she was going through hard financial times.*

*She dated him off and on for a while. He helped her out financially. They got married.*

*She decided that she was going to have a reception and she invited quite a few people and she had a band and food. Everything was going pretty good. Well, during part of this time, my mother had diabetes and she wasn't supposed to be eating all of the food she was eating so she ended up having to go to the hospital. So I went up with her to the hospital. Well, they got her straightened out and she wanted to go back to the reception so we went back to the reception.*

*After a period of time, there was some boys that came there and their name was Kenny. A very rough bunch from Titusville. They loved to fight. And then your mother's brother, a Kane boy, was there. I think it was John. He decided to come with some of his friends, okay, and he liked to fight. So, the Kanes and the Kennys decided to have brawl at the reception.*



*I'm not sure how old my kids were, but they were there and I was there. The first thing I noticed was a big jar of mustard splashing not too far from my feet. But this jar of mustard, it was one of them bigger ones. It was a jar. Then I noticed there was a fight going on. And I seen Denny putting someone in the restroom, in one of them door stalls. I seen your mother whapping someone over the back with a broom. And she was really taking them on. And I happened to be in the kitchen at this time. And at that time, I decided the best thing for me was to get me and my kids out to the car. So I went to the car and it was wet and slushy but I figured it was safer out there. I get really upset when people fight because they could get hurt. Someone could die.*

*Now this is hearsay, but supposedly quite a few people decided to have this fight. Supposedly one of the Kane boys started it. Supposedly one of them lost a tooth. Different people were hitting different people. Food was on the table. There was cake. The hall was a mess. Everything was a mess.*

*I'll tell ya this, but you don't need to write it down. Joyce didn't like this man, and when she was kissing him and he was kissing her, she'd be giving him the finger behind his back. It wasn't a pretty picture. It wasn't what you wanted to do to another person.*

Mom's:

*Bub was the most homely man I had ever seen in my entire life. Joyce just married him for his money. She married a couple of guys for their money. She would marry them, bleed them dry, and divorce them. That was your Aunt Joyce.*

*Every time I saw that man, I got the shudders. Leave it to your aunt to find these persons. A terrible person. He was older than her, but he was the homliest person you ever saw in your life. Just odd. An odd person. There might be a picture of him somewhere.*

*The reception was what I remember because I was very pregnant with your sister and no one would dance with me except your Uncle Denny. Denny would dance with me. But there was a lot of people there. And I don't remember exactly what started it. I remember I was in the kitchen and Denny came through the square window hole of the kitchen and someone hit him with a jar of mustard and then he flew into a rage and he went after the person who did it. Fists started flying and then Johnny was in there and he got into it and then he ended up hurting someone. Then he ended up going to the hospital, I think he had a broken nose and his lips was all messed up, and the police were waiting at the hospital for him when he got there. So they arrested him.*

*I was getting all bent out of shape cause they arrested John and I was trying to tell the police that it wasn't John's fault. That was thirty years ago. But at the fight, at the reception, I got a broom and was swinging the broom . Nine months pregnant and I was hitting people with a broom. They were trying to get me calmed down because everyone thought I was going to go into labor. I was mad because they were hurting John. I was mad and scared at the same time. I was upset because Denny got hit in the face with a jar of mustard so I just picked up that broom and started swinging.*

Aunt Joyce's:

*I don't remember how I met Bub. He fell in love with me, but I never fell in love with him. I figured as long as he had money I might as well marry him, but that was a mistake because he didn't really have money. Everyone said you should marry him because he'll help support your kids because I was really poor. That was stupid. That was a fault of mine. Don't marry anyone for money because they might not really have it.*

*There were dirty dishes in the apartment when we got married.*

*He was really ugly. He looked like his mother – she was ugly too. He had a big nose. He was tall. He liked to kiss people in the eyeball. I don't know if he ever kissed your mom. If he laid one on her, I bet she ran from him.*

*We had the reception at the steel hall in Titusville, like a union hall for the steel workers. But anyhow, everybody got drunk. We kinda made some punch out of grain alcohol. We had a band. It was like a thousand for this reception. There was an awful fight. Someone stepped on a gallon of mustard and your Uncle Denny got really mad. John lost a tooth in the fight. I don't know who punched him. Uncle Denny punched a rich kid in the eye. I got caught in the middle of the fight – everyone was fighting. Bub grabbed a woman and shoved her in the bathroom because he was too drunk to fight. Mom had to go to the hospital because she drank something and then had a sugar reaction. We took her to the hospital. I went back to the hotel room and stayed there alone. Bub went home with my mom because he was too drunk to drive.*

*I ran into him one time, after we divorced. It was at a bar. My friend said that man keeps looking at you. It was Bub. I didn't talk to him. He was, uck. I never even liked him at all.*

## Who She Was

There is a Polaroid of Mom, tinted orange, standing in a field next to a horse. She is in her early teens. Her long hair, strawberry blonde, falls past her breasts, shiny and limp, nearly to her waist. Toasty-orange freckles color her cheeks, just beneath the frames of her tinted, tortoise-shell glasses. She wears a snug sweater, jeans, and leans with one arm thrown over the horse's back. She smiles into the camera, and the viewer can gather that there is nowhere this girl would rather be than in this green field, on this sunny day, in her jeans and sweater, with a horse there to support her as she leans her full weight against it.

The only connection I can make between this person and my mother is the horse next to her, because it seems there is always a horse next to Mom. Mom's hair was long and strawberry when she married my father, but she cut it short right after, frosted it blonde, permed it curly, and gained a hundred pounds. I've never seen her wear blue jeans, have never touched this soft, long hair slipping down her shoulders, could never remember her as being anything but large, wide, a tide of a body moving through a pasture, bending and lifting, carrying brush by the armfuls, saddles, reins, buckets of oats. Her body, in my memory, has always been a strong body, able to lift weights that other women could not, certainly not that girl in the Polaroid, a girl who seems softer than my mother. Smaller. A girl who is like no one I have ever met.

## Sunburn

Do you remember the burns? The massage of sun on your back, moving slowly into you, layer by layer, until tight as a balloon, the skin rose up into soft cushions of blister? I remember the freckles on your shoulders. The shell-colored skin, pale, white, like an oyster opened, gut removed, nothing left but the sparkling opacity of pink. Your shoulders were strong. Bigger than Dad's. Heavy. Like the tide rolling in, washing up your back, and sticking there to your bones. Home from the sunlight, you'd have Sister and me sit behind you and peel the skin up as it died. We'd have contests, see who could pull the longest strip of you without tear. Mom, we'd say, and hold the flesh before your face. Mom, see how much we got from you? Your back was all freckles and skin, so much skin. You were solid. A boulder. We could both fall on you from behind, wrap our arms around your neck, and you'd be steady, sitting there, your girls upon you. You could hold our weight.

## Held Together

As soon as she walks in the door, Mom takes off her bra. One arm up and under her shirt, she finds the thick buckle of elastic against her back, the tin claws holding the strap together, and unplucks each from the other. The bra releases and her skin rises. She brings each strap out of the arm hole, lets them hang like thin, limp skeletons, then puts her hand up her front, over the firm curve of her belly, and pulls down. The instrument slips out, a system of straps, padding, elastic, and buckles. She tosses it to the side and takes in her first free breath of the evening.

## As Much As You Think You Can Hold

Growing up, you learn to eat like your mother, which is whatever you want, whenever you want, and however much you want. Too young to have damaged connections to food of your own, you begin inheriting your mother's skewed relationship with it. Eating is the solution to everything. Boredom. Sadness. Disappointment. And also a way to celebrate. It is happiness. It is recreational. It is, if nothing else, at least something to do. Slices of American cheese, spoonfuls of peanut butter, bowl-fulls of ice cream. Your childhood companion, your childhood friend. Food is something steady you can rely on. It is your go-to guy. It fills you up. It never lets you down.

Friday night buffets are approached with the conviction to "eat until you pop."

Salads on cold plates, first. Lettuce loaded with cheese cubes, Ranch, pepperoni and pasta salad. Bacon bits. Chopped eggs. Then, round two, plates of mac-n-cheese, plates of barbeque, steak, pork chops. Bones mixing with bones, gravy sliding underneath them. Round three. Round four. And when you think you might pop, when your stomach is stretched as tight as a drum, you go for the desserts. You try to get a little bit of everything. Blackberry cobbler topped with ice-cream, pumpkin pie topped with ice-cream, chocolate brownies topped with ice-cream. More and more and more. You're always going back, following your mother, loading up with more.

Your father, tall and thin, only uses up two plates at most – he never wants a salad, never wants dessert. He walks out to the parking lot to stretch his legs and have a

dip. Your mother watches you, seeming to look proud, and says, "Lord, where you gonna put all that?"

Just before leaving, your mother wraps three buttery rolls into napkins and stuffs them in her purse. All the way home, you and your sister groan, holding your stomachs. Later that night, you will come upon your mother in the kitchen, unfolding each of the napkins, bringing out the rolls one by one before digging her fingers into their soft tissue and tearing it apart.

*It* first occurs to you while you are with your friend, Carry. You are thirteen, she is fourteen. This is the summer before high school. You go to her house most days after school, and, like you, Carry hates her body, how her skin puckers, folds, how it all seems so out of control.

One day, she and you are eating pickles in her kitchen. After she is done, she gets up from the table and goes to the bathroom. When she comes back, she is wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

"I just threw up," she says, and you know just what she means. You'd been suspecting it for some time. She grins, shrugs, and sits back down at the table. "You just stick your finger down your throat. It's easy."

You think you could do that. And later that night, back at home, you do.

You remember ice cream the most, how cold it felt while blooming back up your throat.

For two years, it's after every meal.



Bathrooms take on new meaning. Air vents take on significance. Running water. The thickness of the walls. All of the things that might cover up the noises that simply can't be helped. Public bathrooms are trickier. You have to wait for people to leave before you lean over the toilet, wondering if anyone noticed your feet turned in the wrong direction. You try to be quick about it, but sometimes it takes two or three flushes to erase all evidence. You look in the mirror, dot your red eyes, and head back into the restaurant, trying to look normal. When you return to the table, everyone is waiting on you. "Thought you fell in," your mother might say. "Or else got lost."

Honestly, if you had to pick, you'd rather cut off a finger than gain weight. Sometimes you fantasize about this. Making a deal with God or the Devil. Breaking all your fingers, one by one, for the promise of always being thin, of never becoming fat. Because fat is important. It is everything. It's walking down the hallway at school, how you angle your head, how you feel your own skin, measuring every part between pinched fingertips, not being able to tell the difference between hating your body and hating yourself. Your skin runs straight through you, soft, fatty, and your soul feels covered in stretch marks.

A high school friend is hospitalized over the summer for anorexia.

She brings pictures of herself lying in a hospital bed, IVs in her arm, her father next to her bed. She lost maybe fifty, maybe sixty pounds. All in two months.

You feel jealous. You wish you had such self-control.

You eat oranges for dinner. At school, you eat a cookie for lunch. It seems all the skinny girls just eat cookies for lunch. How do they do it? You either skip breakfast, or else binge and purge. Every day is either a starver or a binger and a purger. Iceberg lettuce. Fat free blue cheese dressing. Oranges. Rice cakes. Cucumbers. Cottage cheese. Grapefruit. Endless carrot sticks. Or else half a box of cereal. Six, seven slices of pizza. Two steaks. Three bowls of pasta. Your body is a bag to be stuffed or else wrung dry. All you want in it are the bones.

You jump-rope for twenty minutes in the backyard, the radio on the deck booming out pop songs. Sometimes your mother peeks outside to watch you, and she laughs. You tell her you are doing this for fun. That you like jump roping. After this, you go into your room and step up and down, up and down on the stair-stepper that you begged her to buy you for your birthday. Arms up as you step on the plastic platform, arms down as you step back off. You lie on the carpet, raising your legs up and down, just like you read about in the fitness magazines in the grocery store. You do push-ups, lowering yourself to the carpet, collapsing against it, its fibers itchy against your face. You think about the singer of the band you are listening to. Thin and pretty. This is all you want to be, thin and pretty. There is nothing in the world better than being thin and pretty.

At night, every night, you lie in bed, feeling for bones. You can't sleep without doing this. Checking for the ribs. Pressing against your pelvis. Your collarbones. You reach around and grab at your shoulder blades. Ring your fingers around your wrist. Your ankles. You touch your knuckles, your jawbone, the bumps of vertebrae rising up your neck.

When you awake, you do this again. Throughout the day, you do this. It is a constant measuring of yourself, it is an obsession with how little you can become.

You won't become your mother, is what this all means.

You wonder if she'd been healthier, thinner, if any of this would have happened. Is your obsession with weight loss a subconscious desire not to become her, or is your obsession with weight loss a way to validate her, somehow, through yourself? Because you share the same flesh and bones. No matter how fat or skinny you ever get, you can never shed her flesh. Instead, you make it tighter. You bring it as close as it can get.

In tenth grade, you date a boy. A year into it, you tell him. You use the word: eating disorder. It feels awful coming out of your mouth. You've never told this to anyone, though you suspect some people know. He takes your hands into his, and with tears in his eyes, he tells you are beautiful.

When he asks you to stop, you tell him that you will. And for a few days, you really do try.

When you are twenty-eight, you and your boyfriend are eating at a Mexican restaurant with a married couple. The wife, pregnant, begins talking about an article she'd read which was about an obese man who couldn't leave his house, who couldn't stand up to go to the bathroom.

"I just don't understand how someone could let themselves get that way. I mean, how could anyone be hungry like that all the time," she says, dunking tortilla chips into

the squat bowl of salsa. She is thin. Teaches cheerleading at a middle school. Laughs loud, often. She shakes her head. "I just don't get it."

"Food's an addiction for some people," you say back, suddenly irritated. "It's like a drug. Do you think if people could control it, they'd let themselves get that way? It's just easier to judge them because they're fat, and society is prejudiced against fat people. But it's an addiction, like anything else. A disorder. They don't eat because they're hungry. It's not about hunger for them. It's about trying to fill up something else."

The table goes silent. The words spill out, hard and fast. To keep from glaring at her from across the table, you have to look away. What does she know about food? About being fat?

"Yeah," she says, putting her hands in her lap, looking more thoughtful now. "I guess I just never really thought about it like that."

In your late twenties, you re-teach yourself how to eat, how to honor food, how to savor tastes. You learn how to roast beets, unpeel their crackling, slippery skin, how to sink a knife into their meat and run it through the beet's center. You stop eating meat, learn how to press tofu, learn how to wilt spinach in a pan, among slivers of golden garlic and opaque onions. You buy bunches of carrots at the grocery store, their long, flopping stems still intact just so you can let them hang over your paper bag while walking through the parking lot. Here is a girl that buys fresh vegetables, the carrot leaves announce. Here is a girl who is all-natural, who could live off water and vegetables alone. Here is a girl who strips food down to the essential. An orange. A beet. A carrot. No need for

margarine, no need for salt. Nothing processed, nothing in a box. This is a girl who would never eat two bowls of cereal, who would never eat two slices of pizza.

You walk, holding the paper bag in both arms, carrot leaves brushing the inside of your arm, assuring you, assuring you that you are no longer the girl you used to be.

Yet, it never goes away. Sometimes you are struck to eat like this now, to the point of near paralysis, forcing all your body's effort on the stomach, on breaking up what you have put inside. It reminds you of childhood. It is a sort of comfort, and also a distress. Like your mother must have thought during all those years of endless eating, "This is something I can control, what I put into my body. This is my choice. My choice. My choice." When she got married to a man she barely knew, had his child, then another, when there was no money, when there were no choices, she opened the refrigerator door and let herself have her pick. At the buffet, her choices were vast, and she hurried off to them, having paid good money for them too. She could have two steaks. She could have three rolls, the largest tin-covered baked potato. She could have whatever she wanted, an endless amount of it, until her body told her, "Stop."

And when you look back on it, you have to tell yourself she just wanted you, her girls, to be happy, leading you to the steaming buffet, its sneeze-guard clouded, other families scooping and shuffling, moving on down the line. She would stand next to you, handing you a plate, and say, "Better fill up while you can. Better take as much as you think you can hold."

## Hamburger Helper

Your fingers pull back the taut skin of cellophane that holds the ground beef against its Styrofoam cradle. Collapsed, it is tossed in the trash, wet and sticky with blood. A burner set to six on the stove sizzles as the brick of meat hits the skillet.

A plastic spatula breaks it apart.

Then, a family decision: lasagna, or three cheese, or stroganoff? A box is plucked from the pantry closet. Torn open. Insides removed. The white pouch of seasonings. A clear packet filled with powdered cheese. The twisted bones of noodles.

We add water to the crumbles of browned beef. We add milk. We tear open the bellies of packets and pour their contents out. We stir, wait for the bubbles to rise up from the heat, to break the surface of the sauce. It's as though someone were in that sauce, drowning, the way those bubbles dance so suddenly, so urgently. Noodles are shook in, stirred, and the temperature turned down. Put a lid on it. Trapped steam gathers on the glass, rolling down the sides like tears.

We wait for the noodles to turn tender. For the sauce to thicken. For fifteen minutes, for fifteen years, we wait.

## The Divide

For Dee's sixteenth birthday, Mom buys her a gold-plated ring with the image of a horse's head on it. Dee, at this time, spends her time writing poetry in her bedroom, smoking and drinking at friends' houses, and listening to nineties alternative in her bedroom, door shut, images of Billy Corgan and Tori Amos plastering her walls. I am sitting at the kitchen table when Dee peels off the wrapping paper, opens the little box, and pulls out the small shining ring, holding it up for me and Dad to see, admire. She slips it on her finger while Mom says, "I thought you'd like it. It wasn't cheap." Dee nods, wears it the rest of the day, and slips it off that night, never to wear it again. A decade later, she tells me that was the moment she realized Mom had no idea who she was. The gap had widened. There was Mom, and there was Dee, and dividing them, a path worn wide by horse-hooves, Dee growing up behind the wall of red dirt rising and Mom never trying to walk through to get to her, only trying to pull Dee back in while she still might be in reach.

## Myths

A horse's digestive tract hangs from a sheer curtain of mesentery. It is a tight arrangement of guts suspended on a wibbly-wobbly membrane, a crowded and unstable affair which often leads the horse to colic. The small intestine loops back and forth over itself, layer by layer, then turns into the pouch-like cecum, the large colon, (which, divided into the ventral and the dorsal sections, is large, winding), and then the rectum. The large colon is a popular point of impaction for food, folding abruptly at one end, turning under itself, heading back in the direction from whence it came. Food sometimes can't make the sharp turn required of it while passing through. Oats, hay – they sometimes lodge up, become impacted, and gas builds up from behind. It's the kind of colic that horse folk call "twisted gut." The pressure twists the intestines 180 degrees, twists them like a magician's balloon. Though it's not always food that causes the guts to twist. Sometimes it's stress. Moldy hay. Too hard a ride. A change in the diet. Horses are delicate creatures. So delicate that some people believe all it takes is a sharp turn in the weather to bring one down.

The day cooled and kept on cooling, dropping twenty degrees between morning and dusk. Early spring, and the freshly bloomed morning glories puckered, turned as skinny as cigarettes and wilted in on themselves. People bundled up, marveled at how quickly the temperature had dropped, how the weather had turned on us just like that.

Driving home from school that day, I saw the horse in the pasture, neck stretched, coughing and pawing the ground. The pasture was at the dead-end of the dirt road, right



across from where we lived, in a white farm house enclosed by fields. We didn't own the house, or the pasture either, but the owner let us keep horses there so long as we maintained the field and its wooden, unpainted barn. Dad had fixed up the barn with spare lumber, added in two stalls but no doors to enclose them, and patched up its back room for storing hay. Mom was keeping one horse in the pasture at the moment, High Tower, a black Tennessee Walker, the kind of horse rumored to have a gait so smooth you could sip tea while riding and never spill a drop

I took one look at High Tower and pulled up to the porch to run inside and tell Mom. She was in the middle of cooking spaghetti, but as soon as I told her about the coughing, the pawing – all tell-tell signs of colic – she turned off the burner beneath a pot that was just starting to boil and followed me out to the pasture. She took one look at High Tower rolling on the ground and ran back in to call the vet.

"You go and get him on a halter and a lead," she said. "Get him walking. Keep him off the ground. Don't let him roll."

There's the myth that you have to keep a horse walking if it has colic, that you can't let it roll. But all the horse wants to do is roll. Gas gathers behind the kink in its digestive tract, building pressure, and organs slip around, accommodating, becoming displaced. Sometimes the horse swings its head to the side and nips at the pain, but, unable to reach it, unable to caress it with a hand, it lowers itself to the ground and rolls, using the earth to massage the building pressure in its gut. To have it touched, met with an outside pressure, provides some relief.

But the myth goes that rolling will only twist the horse's guts further, will only make a bad situation worse. Rule of thumb is to call a vet, to keep the horse walking. The hope here is that the kink in the horse's belly might unloosen, that the knot might yet work itself out.

I slid the halter up his face and over his ears, latched the lead onto the halter's metal loop, stepped back and pulled. He followed the lead, first with his neck, then straightened his body up on his legs, stomped his hooves flat on the ground and rose, dust feathering off him through the air. I stepped back, watching his eyes, black in the center and white just around the edges, flashing. His tail slashed. His legs quivered. He followed me, slowly, stopping every few steps to stretch out his neck and blast out another cough.

Farther out, in the pasture's ravine, cows had gathered by a creek. Dark bundles of squirrel nests blotted the upper limbs of branches. Small birds dove in and out of the fir trees that had grown into the wire of the barbed-wire fence, untucking themselves from thick branches and appearing suddenly in the air, flying. The pasture fanned out around us, mute green with a gray sky spread above. Trees cracked the sky, the green buds on their branches just beginning to bloom.

Another myth:

After long rides, Mom would hose the horses down with water and then set them out into the pasture. Feeling good, feeling frisky, they would often drop down to the ground and start to roll, wiggling into the dirt, side to side, legs kicking up into the air over and over again. Mom loved to watch them, would tell us that a horse was only

worth as much as it could roll. One roll would be a one-hundred dollars. Two rolls would be two-hundred. And so on. We would stand alongside the pasture fence, cheering them on and counting.

There is me, pulling the horse, a lead rope dangling from my hand. There is Mom, whipping him from behind with black, braided leather. There is the curve of the horse's nose, soft velvet, its loose lips hanging inches away from me. The breath rolling out of him, still warm as it breaks over my skin. Mom calling, "Keep him walking, Coleen. Gotta keep him walking." The whip rising up, cracking the air, over and over again.

And perhaps the whip didn't so much crack the air that day as it seemed to slice into it, splitting it every time. Soon, the atmosphere seemed cut up and re-arranged all around us, like we were a Picasso, like we were a work of art. Woman with whip. Horse with cough. Teenage girl walking backwards, pulling the horse on a lead. The whip would rise, slice the air as it moved back down, and we'd feel the world re-arrange around us once again.

It could've been moldy hay that caused it. It could've been moldy oats. We'd walk the pasture later, searching for signs: poisonous mushrooms, poisonous plants, any trash blown in. All this after the vet said drops in temperature didn't cause horses to colic, that that was just another wife's-tale, just another myth.

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The vet arrived hauling a long, white trailer behind his truck. He got out and walked up to us in the pasture, carrying a metal box filled with medical supplies. Mom hollered at him, "I've been keeping him walking."

He hollered back, "What you whipping him for?"

"Keep him from rolling."

The vet looked at Mom, hands on his sides, and asked, "Why?"

"To keep him from twisting up inside," she said, looking at him, breathless, through her glasses. We'd been outside, whipping him around the pasture, for nearly an hour.

"A horse can't twist his intestines from rolling on the ground. That's just a myth," the vet replied coolly, kneeling and opening his medicine box to bring out a stethoscope. "The only thing you're doing by whipping him is making him suffer more."

And maybe he shook his head when he said it. Maybe he rolled his eyes. Either way, the message was conveyed. I knew that what he saw when he walked up to us was two ignorant country folk making a horse that was already suffering, suffer more. Leaning on a myth to inform our actions, never even guessing at the logic behind it.

I let the lead rope go slack between me and the horse while the vet came over and held his head to the horse's stomach, collected stool with an elbow-length glove, and verified an intestinal twist, too deep in the colon for him to reach in and work out. The horse stood still for a moment, then began to do what it had been wanting to do the whole time. It spreads its front legs forward, its hind legs back, stretched out its neck, and let out a dry, heavy cough. While Mom and the vet talked payment arrangements, Mom

explaining that we didn't have the money to pay him up front to put the horse down, I took the lead rope off High Tower and stepped back, went ahead and let him roll.

Later that night, after the vet had taken off with High Tower, hauling him half-suspended by a sling hung from the horse trailer's ceiling, Mom sat at the kitchen table, rubbing tears from her glasses with her shirt-tail.

"I wouldn't have whipped him if I'd have known," she said.

"You didn't know," I replied.

She looked past me, seeing the whole scene again in her mind. The whip landing on the horse's backside. The pop of leather on his skin, the skin flinching under the whip as his hooves stumbled forward.

"I didn't know," she said, and shook her head. And even as I touched her shoulder, even as I told her again and again that she had only been trying to help, that she hadn't known, I thought to myself, "But you should have known. You should have known better."

## How to Clean a Horse

Mom ties the horse to the post. A bubble moon has just expanded into the blue sky and the yellow necks of honeysuckle are looking down, long and curved, dappling the bushes like miniature french horns. A crow limps along crooked barbed wire from post to post, calling.

The field is yellow grass and weeds along shifting fence. It is a field borrowed from a neighbor whose husband has just left her for someone younger. Her name is Paulette, and she hangs flowers upside down through her house, drying them until they are as brittle as dust. I walk over in the evenings and she teaches me how to make topiaries out of dead flowers. She is slim and tall and wears lipstick, nothing like my mother. I wish at times for a dark mother like her, with long fingers painted opal, who drinks pomegranate tea and smiles too much. My mother puts milk and Splenda into her tea and clips her nails to the quick, sometimes so close infections set in.

Mom hands me a blue bucket, reaches her hand inside and retrieves a round black curry comb.

I do not wish to help clean this horse.

Cicadas cat-call at us. How round and soft she is, how young and fresh I am, how we bend down and lift the heavy legs of the horse and sink picks into the soft frogs of his hooves. Tiny pebbles lodge inside the thin gray flap of skin, a sunken V with bits of manure and clips of grass tucked in along its firm exterior line. The smell of rotting things as I dig into it, place the foot down, pat the horse's flinching thigh. He stomps his foot and turns, watches me walk around the tail, lifting the next foot. No money to pad

his hooves with iron shoes. He'll make do. For now, his hooves will remain cracked along the edge, like gently used sneakers dropped in a charity box just in time for Christmas.

I run the metal-bristled brush through the horse's mane, watching my mother snake a hose to the water trough, filling it, pulling fallen leaves from its foamy water. I braid the horse's tail like I have braided Barbie's hair, and then allow it to unravel because there is nothing I have to bind it with. Mom returns and we each brush out the loose dust that the curry has released, dust that collects upon us. Mom runs her hands along the horse's back, pats it hard, and then scratches behind the horse's long, tall ears. She whispers into its ear like she has never whispered into mine.

## Riding Lawn Mower

We buy our first riding lawn mower from Sears. It's a silver, four-wheeled machine, with a black seat, a steering wheel, and a lip that sticks out to the side that spits a steady stream of bright green grass clips. This is Mom's gift to Dad. She has her horses to ride, and now he has his lawn mower. In the early evenings, they leave the house. Mom drives down to the pasture, saddles up, and rides. Dad goes out to the shed, fills the mower's tank with gas, and rides. Our yard at this house is big. He could easily mow for hours if he stayed at turtle speed.

Sometimes Dad lets me drive the lawn mower. The mower has a throttle that moves up a ladder of dashes. At the top is the image of a jack rabbit, at the bottom, one of a turtle. Dad watches me drive circles in the yard, sometimes instructing, "Take it a little faster. Just push in the clutch. Just push in the clutch." I push in the clutch, shift higher and my body jerks forward.

"There ya go," Dad hollers.

We keep this lawn mower for twenty years, long after the plastic seat has peeled up, its yellow foam spilling out. The rabbit and turtle both fade, their stark outlines turning to pale shadows, the steady dashes once separating them, now random marks, as though both had taken off a long time ago, leaving only their scratch marks behind.



## Windshields

In the cold blue mornings of winter, Dad would leave the house a few minutes early to scrape the frost off my windshield. Sometimes there was ice on it. Sometimes snow. I always considered his scrapping my windows equivalent to the little notes Mom would sometimes leave on the kitchen counter for me in the morning, notes that said, “I love you.”

## Folgers Instant

Some of the earliest memories I have of Dad are of him standing in the kitchen, early morning, waiting for the microwave to beep, his work uniform on, the sun still down, the world outside a hazy gray of stretching birds, of silent car engines waiting to be cranked.

In these memories, he takes his plastic mug, steaming, from the microwave. Still in my pajamas, I walk in closer to watch him dip a spoon in the plastic container of Folgers, bring it back out, brown crystals shining, and tilt them into the water. They dissolve on the surface into a churning cloud.

I've tasted this coffee, a spoonful of it, once before, and can't figure out why he drinks it, why he carries it out to the car every morning, rests it between his legs or else holds it on the dash, why he keeps it so hot that he has to slurp it for the longest time, tentatively reaching his lips out for the cup, not daring to take a full-on swig, not willing to wait until the steam has stopped rising.

He pours milk into it and stirs. As he sips at it, I ask him why he drinks coffee if it doesn't taste good.

Just habit, he says, shrugging.

Later in the day, the spoon will still be there, a brown crescent formed beneath it, from where the coffee has slipped off and gathered.

## New Lawn Mower

We used the new Sears lawnmower to haul barrels of water up to the horse pasture. Mom drove it up to the well house, parked it, and put two green, plastic barrels on the wagon Dad had built. A black rubber hose, attached to the pump, snaked through the well house and out into the grass. I hung the hose in one barrel, let it fill with water, then placed it in the other. As the water rose, I stretched my arms deep in the cool liquid, feeling the water ripple through my fingers like tadpoles.

Mom drove the lawnmower down the road to the pasture. I sat on the back of the wagon, watching pavement unroll below my feet. The barrels rocked, splashing slips of water over their rims, some of them catching my back.

Going through the pasture gate, I stood and held onto both barrels, balancing them against the shallow ditch the lawnmower dipped in and out of. Mom parked alongside the water trough, heaved herself out of the seat, and walked around. The horses came up, touched our shoulders with their noses.

Mom took one side of the trough, I took the other. We tipped it, spilling out pine needles, grass and horse spit, dead insects with wings folded, legs tucked, languid as thread. We took brushes to the sides, scrubbed off scum, swirled the remaining water around the sides, and made one final pour. Beyond the pastures and fence lines, the lavender sky. Mosquitoes touched down upon us, took what they could before our wet hands smacked them away.

Mom stood on the ground while I climbed on the wagon. One, two, three – I tilted the barrel forward and Mom caught it in her hands, guided it toward the lip of the

trough. White water fanned out. The horses walked closer, their hooves sinking in the muddy earth. Filled, the trough rippled like a clear lake, near perfect, like something you might want to dive into.

With barrels emptied, Mom took her seat behind the wheel, started up the engine, and made a U-turn in the field. The horses dipped their hanging lips into the water, rose up, dribbled more grass into the trough. Gnats swarmed.

I held the barrels as we dipped in and out of the shallow ditch. All the way home, we hummed from the mower's engine. The barrels, Mom's large body, and my own, steadily shaking on this new lawnmower, a lawnmower we would keep for over two decades, until no amount of Dad's tinkering could make it run any longer. By then, there would be a new pasture, a new barn, and new horses. Mom would be able to reach a hose straight into the trough, and the barrels would be filled with oats. I would come home from college one day and follow her up to the barn. Watching her scoop oats from the barrels, I would remember how we had once filled them with water, the evenings when it was just she and I, moving down the road, attached to each other only by a hitch.

## Work-related Accident

(2007)

The morning is cold, dim. It is the day after Thanksgiving. Dad gets up for work, dresses, takes a plastic mug of water from the microwave, mixes in a spoonful of Folgers, and walks through the chilled morning air to his car. He takes slow, cautious sips as he heads towards work at the wheat mill, pulling down a long gravel driveway off downtown's main road, passing silos filled with grains, and up to a long concrete building where he's been working for the past year as a mechanic for the distribution trucks. He parks next to the garage and gets out, leaving the mug on the passenger seat, where a pile of mugs have gathered, an accumulation of every morning just like this one.

He goes into the shop, turns on the lights, and then goes to open the metal garage doors. Yet one of the doors sticks. Won't open. He pulls a stool up to the coil that holds the pressure of the door in place, steps up, and looks. At that moment, the coil, rusting for years unnoticed, snaps. All of its force hits him directly in the forehead, cracking open his skull to the brain, knocking him unconscious. The coil wraps around his left arm and pins him to the wall. Minutes go by before someone comes in and finds him hanging, legs off the ground, his arm pinned by the coil. An ambulance is called, as well as the fire department, who will have to cut him down before he is air-lifted to the hospital. In the following days, he will have brain surgery, as well as surgery to try to repair the nerve damage in his arm. He will go through months of cognitive and physical therapy. He will go on worker's comp. He will not be able to work again. He will be classified as disabled.

## Phone Call

The morning after Thanksgiving, I was an hour away, sleeping on a couch in the city of Charlotte, hung-over, probably, because, at twenty-seven, I awoke most mornings hung-over. It was the second time Mom called, the insistent ringing of my cell phone, that opened my eyes to the soft rays of sun just starting to break through the vines climbing over my apartment's windows.

"Coleen," she said, and the way she said it sent me straight-up sitting, sent me scrambling to put on clothes and shoes even before she told me about the accident, about which hospital he was being flown to.

## First Sight

Dad landed in the hospital an hour ago, and now Mom and I are permitted to walk back to the emergency room to see him. He looks like a bloody plank of a man with his forehead peeled open, blood down his face, blood caked around his swollen eyes. His arm, now purple, lies limp at his side, overtop a white sheet.

Mom goes to his bedside and leans her body toward him. Not knowing where, or how, to touch him, she holds one arm inches above his chest and lightly touches his shoulder with her hand.

"Honey," she says. "I love you. You're going to be alright."

Dad pushes open an eye and looks sideways in her direction. He moves his mouth, trying to speak, trying to smile, trying to reassure her he will be okay. Yet, nothing comes. He closes his eyes. Mom, helpless to do anything else, licks a finger and touches it to his face, wetting the blood that has dried there, trying to free him of it.

## Father in Heaven

The nurses are angels and the doctors are gods. You once believed your father a god, grew up, then lost your beliefs. You now believe in the steady beep of a machine. You believe in sixteen stitches. You believe in helicopters and hospitals. The sink of an elevator before it rises eleven floors. You don't believe in God like your father does and can't pray for him. All you can do is chase after the gods in the hallways and demand answers. You ask about swelling, infections, blood in the brain. You ask about odds. But the gods never give straight answers. They teach you patience, expect your trust. They test your faith.

You stare at his left hand. It lies on his stomach, refusing to move. The fingers look the same to you. Still grained with the oil of broken down cars and factory machines. Thick. Dirty. Over-used and forgotten. But the god who's tall and carries a clipboard says the fingers are not the same fingers. Inside the arm, a nerve is severed. There's no connection anymore. Those fingers many never hold a wrench again. They may, God forbid, finally get clean.

Heaven is filled with prayers. You can feel them on your skin. You can't wash them off. You hope some of them, rising up the floors before touching the sky, will spread through your father, that some will seep in through the staples forming a rainbow around his head. You have no prayers to offer him. You are as sterile as a needle.

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Gods have little compassion here. They are starched white and pressed flat. They only appear when blood drips or the pain is too much to bear. And when they speak, no one in the room breathes. The questions that mount in your brain cannot be spoken. You are, after all, only mortal. You leave it in the gods' hands. You breathe only when the gods have left.

After your father's brain surgery, you spend a night in Heaven. Through the night, his catheter monitor beeps and, semi-conscious, he begins to pull at it. You buzz for the angels but they never come. You walk out to the hallway and see them behind a desk, feet up on chairs, eating and talking. No gods around. Too late in the night or early in the morning for their rounds.

An angel notices you, smiles, asks what you need. You tell him.

Be right there, he says. You turn, begin to walk around the corner, and hear the same angel ask the others, "What's she doing here this late?"

You go outside to smoke and pass a woman who is collapsing outside the sliding doors. It is night. She looks up at the sky, at another chopper that has just arrived, delivering souls. The woman points up at its landing. She testifies, "My baby. That's my baby." An angel walks out to assist her.

You sit next to your father in his mint-green room. He is asleep. A tube runs out of his head, through a pillow of gauze. Two more through his nose, then another in his arm. Sometimes, he coughs. This worries you. A hard cough or sneeze could damage the

repair done by the gods, could rip the soft net of tissues separating the brain from the sinuses. A sneeze could destroy everything.

An angel walks in to check his morphine. When she leaves, you decide to give it a try. You aren't a believer, but you don't know what else to do.

You pray, but not sincerely. At any rate, it gives you no peace. It changes nothing.

Miracles occur. Your father sitting in bed, flirting with the angels. A slight movement when he tries to curl his fingers. The before and after x-rays of his skull. Him counting to twenty, him recalling what he ate for breakfast.

Two and a half weeks after his accident, your father is going to prove that he can walk a full lap around the floor. Once he has shown that he can, he will be allowed to leave for home. You help him tie his gown in the back, and then you lean your shoulder into him as he wraps his arm around you. Together, you both step slowly past the angels' station, past the dim doors of other rooms, and come to a rest at a window at the end of the hall. Another helicopter comes in. Watching it land, your father squints, smiles. The sunlight gathers in the white whiskers on his face, pools in the pale blue of his eyes, in the pale blue of his hospital gown.

"I always wanted to ride in a helicopter, and now that I got to, I don't even remember it," he says.

"Well, I do," you says. "I was out there in the parking lot, watching you land."

He looks at you for a moment, then back out at the sky. Still amazed that he is there with you, you reach out and take hold of his nerve-damaged hand. You give it a little squeeze, and you ask if he can feel it.

## Disabled

Disabled. That word, like an surgical instrument. Sharp. Precise. It speaks nothing to the clumsiness that is disability, that reduces a body wrecked by trauma into the idea that something is no longer able to do what it once did. Turn a wrench. Remember words. Pin a sentence down to its period. And what does disabled even look like when put into action? A forehead peeled open then stapled back together, just left of the center, from hairline to nose? An arm in a sling? The way the good hand scratches at the temple as the battered brain grasps at language to convey what one who is disabled feels? A progression of afternoons with nothing to do? The ending of one kind of life and the emergence of another? To be disabled is to be not what you once were. It is to be unattached from it. You are the dis. You are not the abled.

## Fingers

After your Dad's accident, you will remember sitting on the couch, Thanksgiving day, and holding two of his fingers – right hand or left? right hand or left? – in all five of yours. There was a Christmas tree in the corner of the room. The television was on. A relative's ultrasound was playing on the television, the latest technology to people who could afford it. Her baby hung on the screen, made only of shadow and light, and we sat watching it, guessing at the eyes and mouth, the flickering heart, the fingers curled into themselves, as new as they come, never once touched, never once held. For the time being, entirely perfect.

## Stains Lifting

All his life, he'd been fixing things. A mechanic for factory machines, a mechanic for trucks. I'd never known his hands not to be etched in oil, permanently stained black around the fingernails, at the knuckles and in the palm. And so, lack of work turned his hands clean. How odd to see this new skin emerge from a fifty-five-year-old man. Turning softer. Lighter. Hands still large, nearly twice the size of mine, one finger large enough for me to wrap all my fingers around. And is this disabled, too? Calluses smoothing, dirt finally lifting? Blue nails turning clear?

## Bending and Searching

In elementary school, Dee and I find a dead frog in our gravel driveway. Dee picks it up between her fingers and holds it up to the sun. Preserved beneath sparkling mica and the silver dust of gravel for months, possibly years, the frog is like a mummy, a pharaoh, a dried-out king. Hollow eye sockets. Faded spots. Mouth pushed out into a V, flattened by the car that ran it over.

We gather pine needles and grass to make it a bed in a cardboard box. We write in red marker across the box, "Frog Hospital." We place a jar's lid filled with water next to the frog, kill flies with swatters, drop them within reach of the it's paper-thin toes. We sprinkle water over it's body and wait, our knees turning pink as we kneel on the concrete porch, waiting for a miracle, praying for it to rise again.

Dee spots two small red frogs in our backyard. Knowing they are poisonous and should not be held, just like the little red berries that grow wild in the yard are poisonous and should not be eaten, Dee goes after them anyway. I remain on the porch, calling, "No, Dee! No!"

She plants her hands on the ground, over and over, only to rise empty-handed, to crouch over, to go stepping after them again. Finally, she catches one and carries it up to the porch to show me. When she cracks open her hands, the frog jumps out, sending me screaming and running back. I yell at Dee, "You better go wash your hands good. Those things could kill you."

The frogs disappear into the yard as Dee runs inside to wash the poison from her hands. I stay outside, watching the grass for blips of red, wondering if the chance to hold them had been worth the risk.

A white porcelain tub leans against an old shed in a family member's backyard. Dee and I, playing near it, walk over and find the tub filled with tea-colored water and darting tadpoles. Their bodies are shimmery green, opaque, except for their large, pea-shaped heads. We dip our hands into the water and lift. The tadpoles, flipping in our hands, are still forming. It's as though they are stuck in time, their heads moving fast before them, like a bullet, while their tails draw out behind them like flames.

At "Springs of Life" summer camp, Dee and I stand along a thin stream that cuts through the mountain. Preacher wives stand around us in long skirts and baggy t-shirts, watching the children dig for crawdads in the water. A young girl, whose blonde hair is falling down her shoulders in curls, carries a small toad in her palm. She holds a rock in her other hand and jabs it over and over into the toad's pale belly. While she smashes the creature, the wives watch her, continue talking, only telling her to put the frog down when the sound of the church bell rings through the trees, calling us all to chapel.

Dee finds a frog easily enough just beyond our porch. Holding the frog up to her face, she watches it with her hazel-blue eyes. Her strawberry blonde bangs cut high across her forehead, the same way my straw blonde bangs cut high across mine – both products of Mom's attempt to save money by cutting our hair herself. Like Mom, cinnamon freckles



fall across Dee's cheeks, while my face is clear and tan. Less sensitive to the light, my skin browns while Dee's burns, yet both our legs are still young, barefoot, soft hairs covering them, turning visible in the sunlight.

"Kiss it," I say.

"I will."

She touches her finger to the top of the frog's head, brings it to her face, and kisses it so quick its hard to tell if she really does at all. Either way, she half-tosses, half-drops the frog and steps back. We hold our breath, for a moment believing that maybe a prince will rise up. And when the moment passes, and the frog continues being a frog, our hearts sag just a little with the knowledge that fairy tales have nothing to do with real life.

Dee sits on porch steps, the overhead light throwing a crescent of light upon the dark yard. She waits for their shadows to leap from the ground, to go after them, her bare feet stepping through the night's cool grass, stopping, re-orienting, stepping again. Just to find one before it is time for bed. Bent-over, nightgown hiked up to her knees, she will walk out for them, bending and searching.

Mom tells Dee, after a frog has just peed in her hand, that she'll get warts. Dee throws down the frog and tears in for the bathroom. When she comes back out, red-faced from crying, hands wet from washing, Mom says, "They won't really give you warts, you know. I was just kidding."

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As we head to the school that Mom drives school bus for, our car breaks through the thick fog. Early in the mornings, thick patches rise from nearby creeks, flooding the air, graying our windows.

Mom says, "It's awful froggy out this morning."

"Foggy, not froggy!" Dee and I holler from the back seat.

"That's what I said. Froggy," Mom replies, every time, a grin set into her and our faces.

During a summer I spend back home from graduate school in New Orleans, frogs seem to spring up like wildflowers. Unexpected. Everywhere. From behind tulips grown in the weeds along the house. From inside flower pots or under pet bowls. Posing atop porch railings, still as statues. Some of them simply startle me, but others make me scream. I catch them scampering across the porch, hopping through the yard, ambling across the cracks in concrete walkways, cracks filled with tiny purple flowers, their blooms no larger, I imagine, than the frogs' tiny pounding hearts.

I go out one night to smoke on the carport, but the screen door resists opening. I push harder and see a giant toad rolling underneath the door like a piece of dough. I scream. The toad rolls, all belly, legs and eyes. It stands, wobbles forward, then hops out across the carport. I hurry inside to tell Dee.

"Really," she says, getting off the couch, rushing past me to the door. "How big was it?"

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Stella, Dee's five-year-old daughter, finds one posed atop the porch's railing and runs inside to alert me and Dee of it. Before heading back outside, Stella grabs a camera.

The frog remains posed on the railing, all four feet pressed together, its head tilted up to the blue sky. Before Dee scoops it up, Stella tells her to wait. She puts the camera right up to the frog and begins snapping photos. Photo after photo, the frog stays still, as though carved from marble. When it does leap away, its body stretches out, impossibly long, graceful.

Stella leans over the railing and points. "There he is, Mommy!"

"Watch him for me, Stella," Dee says, hurrying across the porch, turning the corner and moving, barefoot, once again out into the grass. She stretches out her arms and cups her hands, and lifts the frog, folding her hands around it, as though she were in prayer.

## Infestation

(2005)

They survived the winter, simply waiting to fall. To crack the skin of their coverings, open up to light, and slip through to the living. Something about the cold not being cold enough to kill them properly, efficiently. Imagine a million little bodies humming in tree limbs, pulsing with small bursts of light, turning and turning and turning into something else. Incubating among cold limbs, hearing only the faint fall of snow touching and melting into the hollows of branches. The clatter of squirrels circling a trunk. The scratch of birds, landing from flight. In spring, they broke free of themselves, unfolded from thready wrappings, and inched out into our world. In a single night, they dropped in unison, falling fearless into a blue dim morning, shuddering, jerking, finally free.

The sky looked to have unraveled. If I say there were millions of silk threads dropped all around us, one might say, “No, not millions. Maybe thousands. Thousands I could believe. Thousands of worms are reasonable.” But I stick with millions. It was as though someone had boiled the grass over night, and the worms had risen like froth, thickening the air. We passed through them, our arms reaching, trying to break through. Their threads clung to us, bending and stretching and coming to rest on our backs. We flicked the little worms off one by one, rolling our palms over silk threads, struggling to detach.

I was living in the city with Dee and her three-year-old daughter, Stella, when the worms descended. In the mornings, I often took Stella to preschool, and I had to cover her in a blanket to keep away the worms. Still, they stuck. But they weren't sticky. They were as soft as velvet, dry, and so green they were almost neon. I'd place Stella in

her car seat and pick off the worms I could find, still always missing some. Stella would find them along the ride, hold them up to show me, waving her hand in the rearview with a worm pinched between two fingers, turned to mash in its middle. “Look, Aunt Coo! I got a worm!” Still too young to realize death, she’d wipe the worm off and go on kicking her feet, perhaps just thinking about it being so green, or so soft, or simply there, upon her, as though it’d chosen her to land upon, as though, in the time between discovery and death, she and the worm had suddenly become the closest of friends.

Walking to our apartment, I had to cover my mouth or risk breathing them in. My sister caught herself chewing one, fed to her by her hair. Drinking on a bar patio, we smoked and picked worms from our beers, off the rims of our glasses. We stood and bent over, shook them from our hair. They were the new dandruff, covering everyone’s shoulders. They were the talk of the town. People in lines shared worm stories – we all had a worm story. Trees infested, leaves eaten. Porches turned green with bodies let loose from threads. The little fucks were relentless. They became a neighborhood nuisance. Our neighborhood nuisance. Nearly lovable, like a puppy that won’t stop shitting on the floor. Flyers went up, advertising *Plaza-Midwood’s First Ever Cankerworm Festival*. We carried worms on our palms, named them George or Mae. We leaned over in the middle of sentences, plucking the critters from others’ eyebrows, tossing the worms behind our shoulders, all the while still talking, all the while never missing a beat.

I’d been calling them inchworms. My little childhood friends. My former backyard companions. I remember climbing trees, knees scraping bark, and catching the silhouette

of a worm on the other side of a sun-lit leaf. The shadow of it moving along, folding and unfolding, sometimes stopping to raise itself up like a sinner before an altar, struck by the spirit, wavering before suddenly collapsing down. I'd climb out to it, tilt the leaf so the worm would roll into my palm. Its soft body would coil, uncoil, then resume its course, straightening itself out, then jerking back legs to front, back legs to front, its middle rising up like a rainbow, then falling flat as the horizon. Front and back, front and back, lightly over my wrist, lightly up my blue-veined arm.

They died in masses through the season. With spring rain, slipped their threads and wound up in street gutters, mixed among fallen flowers, blooms of deep purple. Pollen fell out with them. The sky was falling, perhaps, flower by flower, worm by worm. Trees shook themselves free of life, prepared for the long haul of summer, the continual suck of heat, the eventual wilt. I walked to my car, stepping over the long stretch of worms and flowers, so thick I could scoop them up with my hands and let them trickle through my fingers. So much death. That's what I was thinking when I got in my car: how could death be so beautiful, so colorful? I turned my wipers on to clear the pollen from my windshield, too thick to see through, and listened to a reporter on NPR crunch numbers on the war. X many dead. X many killed to date. X many civilians. Soldiers. X. X. X. I couldn't comprehend the numbers, couldn't put an emotion to the statistic. Couldn't feel the way I was supposed to feel upon learning the facts. Instead, through the yellow scum smearing my windshield, I stared at the bright colors lining the streets, thinking, that too, is death.

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I spotted a solid net of silk billow out from the limbs of an old oak across the street. Too far tangled to spread their own ways, the threads merged, creating a solid sheet as transparent as skin peeled up from a sunburn. Like the body of a massive jellyfish, the net filled with air and floated free of the branches, brushing along the pavement, sidewalks, tumbling down the road.

I never made it to the *Canker Worm Festival*, though I did begin calling them “canker worms” instead of “inchworms.” It was a moment of weakness. A denial of myself. “Cankerworm” was what you said when you knew what you were talking about. “Inchworm” was what everyone else said. In fact, if someone said “inchworm,” I’d be quick to correct them. “It’s actually cankerworm.” But “canker” sounds terrible coming out of the mouth. Canker sores. Cantankerous. Cancer. Cranky. Whereas “inch” hops from the tongue, hints at distance, little parts, something small but whole.

People began circling trunks with cotton to ward off this continual hatching of more worms. They were eating their way through our neighborhood, tree by tree. *Canker Worm Festival* flyers were replaced with *How to Kill Canker Worms* flyers. No one wanted a relapse, another spring so webby, so worm-green. We wanted our leaves back. We wanted to walk without feeling the drag of threads behind us, rippling from our movement, catching air when we ran, falling upon us when we stopped. Perhaps they reminded us too much of ourselves, made us too aware of place, movement, how little things are the hardest to remove. If we could have come after them with pitchforks and

torches, we would've. We wanted back our open air. Clean shirts. The thrill was gone. We'd never loved them to begin with.

Walking along a sidewalk at nighttime, I passed one tree, lit by a street light, that had no more leaves for the worms to feast upon. Bound with webbing, it glowed in the street light. Branches curved through its silk cloud, emerging into the night, gasping for breath. I moved out to the open air of the road, away from overhanging limbs, continuing to pass home after home, their trees wrapped tenderly in cotton, hurt, nearly dying from so many small bites.

A loud, vibrating hum coming from above brought me outside. Standing on my porch, I watched a small plane flying just above our homes, spilling out a wash of yellow powder over the neighborhood. Like pollen, but thicker, dusting our homes, our yards, our trees. Something to kill the worms, I suspected. Stepping back inside, I closed the door and continued watching through a window.

Stella would not go outside to play for some days after. We would wait for a heavy rain to come, to wash the worms from our gutters, the poison from our trees, for the bodies to flood out into the roads and fill the gutters of our streets.

The worms, while still a presence, began to die out. One might have passed the occasional worm inching down a sidewalk, rising from moment to moment to search the skies for its brothers, before falling back down to continue inching. Dozens still hung from single threads on trees limbs, twitching. And while the trees would not begin to



recover till the next spring, at least we had taken measures, ensured if not a total extinction, at least a strong weakening of their forces.

Weeks after the spray, Dee and I sat on the back stoop of our apartment, overlooking our little neighborhood of brick duplexes, its grid of sidewalks, the little plots of grass before every front door, some displaying trees that had managed to bloom. Stella was outside with us too, running back and forth, back and forth, through the grass. At some point, she stopped and looked above us towards the top of the door.

“Look!” she said.

We turned our heads, re-angled our bodies, and watched a worm hanging just above our heads, twisting and flexing. One more survivor.

Stella called out, "Look at it fly! Look at it fly!"

And for one short moment, with our eyes lifted, we did.

## The Great Weight of Her

(2004)

The first pill was after Dee's C-section. The nurse brought it in to her room, and suddenly, Dee remembers experiencing a quick and deep elation, a sharp turn from the pain – emotional and physical – that she was experiencing. This was the day after giving birth, and at first, she associated the elation with that of being a new mother. She'd just brought life into the world. Her baby was healthy. Beautiful. There was a life that depended on her, that needed her. She felt, perhaps for the first time, necessary.

Once she was home from the hospital, she continued taking the pain pills until the bottle was empty. Then, almost immediately after, anxiety crept in. Fits of crying, depression. A dull happiness lingering around the corner, somewhere, just out of reach. In time, she comes to realize that it wasn't being a new mother that had lifted her out of her pain and depression, it was the pills.

Two years after Stella's birth, Dee ends her relationship with her boyfriend and decides to move to Charlotte to live with me until she can afford her own place. I'm not aware of her taking any pills, and perhaps at the time, the pills weren't so much of a problem as a luxury. If she had them, she would take them, but if not, she could get by. She was not yet actively searching them out, shaking beneath a blanket or experiencing panic attacks when she couldn't obtain them. At this time, her world had not yet begun rotating on the axis of a tablet.

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After moving to Charlotte, Dee finds work at a Bob Evans, waiting tables. She opens the restaurant, some days having to be there by 5 am. When this happens, I take Stella to daycare. I wake her and dress her, I fold her small body into a plush pink blanket and carry her down the sidewalk to my car. Her head rests on my shoulder as I listen to the small squeaks of her thumb-sucking.

Dee comes in from work in the afternoons with Stella trailing behind her, carrying painted papers of that day's arts and crafts. Dee removes her blue apron and sets a wad of cash on the coffee table and lies on the couch. A sharp burn runs from her lower back and down her leg, the return of an old injury had in a high school gym class, nearly ten years back. The worst thing for this injury is standing on one's feet for long periods, but Dee's shifts at the restaurant last for several hours at a time, and the only chance she has to sit down at work is when she is smoking a cigarette in the break room. She hobbles around the apartment, sucking down aspirin to help relieve the lightning rods of pain shooting through her left side.

Her story of addiction begins here: A woman at work begins selling Dee pain pills so she can make it through the day. Immediately, the pills become a necessity, something she can't do without. She goes to work and comes home and she is happy, functional, able to spend time with her daughter. I am pleased, and also, I am ignorant as to why her pain is suddenly, magically, gone. Rather than be skeptical, I am thankful. At the time, I'm working two jobs and attending college. I help out with Stella, but I am sometimes insensitive to my sister's emotional needs. Being at home during Dee's "moods" depresses me, and I often leave her there alone at night, opting to have drinks with my friends at a local bar instead. Dee becomes lonely and more depressed. She

feels she has no one. The pills help. The addiction turns into a deeper necessity, not only physical, but emotional. She becomes dependent.

My story of guilt begins here: If I had been home more often, Dee would not have been lonely. If I had tried harder, spent more time, engaged her more in conversation. If I could have made her laugh, even once a night. . . . I hear laughter increases serotonin, the happy chemical somewhere in the brain, the life-saving drip that has somehow gone dry in her. If I could help her meet people, or lose weight, or go back to school, or be more organized, or quit smoking, or manage her money. If I could fix her. . . . I am to blame, I will later think. I have not cared enough.

Some days, I walk over from my apartment to hers. She has moved across the street from me, into a two-bedroom duplex. Some days I find her clipping faces of women from magazines, pasting them on poster boards as collages. Other days, she is on the floor, making art with her daughter, ignoring the thick gobs of glue or finger paint that slide off the paper's edge. They look up at me, smiling when I come in, greeting me with a long and cheerful, "Hi, Aunt Coo."

Then there are days, sometimes strung together into weeks, when I come over to find her curled into a ball on the couch, eyes red and puffy, with tissues surrounding her. She stares straight ahead when I speak to her. And while she is somewhat aware of what is around her, she also seems unable to be a part of the things closest by. I enter the room and sit on the floor next to Stella, watching as she plays with safari animal toys, whispering to them in her child's soft, sugar-coated voice. Dee nods in and out of sleep.

I make dinner, clean, put Stella to bed, then watch television next to Dee on the couch. She manages to croak out, “Thank you, sissy.”

“No problem,” I tell her.

Such a hopeful, paradoxical phrase – no problem. If there is no problem, there is also the implication that there is no solution.

Dee and I take Stella for walks through the neighborhood. These walks often raise her spirits. She pushes the stroller and Stella sits inside, feet dangling out, pointing at pine cones and flowers she wants us to gather for her. Dee talks about how she never felt she could love anything like she loves her daughter, and we talk about Stella’s future, about how we want for her the things we never had. Hearing my sister talk about the future gives me some sort of reassurance that things will be okay, that despite her fits of depression, things will be okay. Listening to her make plans for the future is like waking up from a bad dream and realizing that you’re safe, that there was really nothing to worry about after all. Or it could be the reverse, falling into sleep and believing in the dream you are in, somewhat aware that you are dreaming, but willing to submerge your consciousness into it for as long as possible. You pull her words and smiles over yourself like a blanket. The warm sun falls on your shoulders. This is your family. This is your life.

I want to believe in the narrative of a fairy tale, that things work themselves out in the end. I want to believe in *deus ex machina*, in saving grace from above, that there is

something in the clouds waiting to lift our burdens once we begin to buckle under their weight. I want to believe in the consistency of the self, that Dee will be Dee and that I will be me, and that, while we may change like the seasons, our winters will always – always – release their grayness in exchange for the colors of spring. I want to believe in renewal. That we are constantly being reborn. I'd like to think nothing ever dies.

One night, Dee comes over and tells me that she is going to move back in with our parents. She is broke, miserable at her job, and wants to save money to go back to school. She is sitting across from me on my couch, and the two of us are playing UNO. Stella sits on the floor, playing with a train set I have built in the corner of my living room for her, next to a box of toys and a television set that is topped with tapes of cartoons. Cicadas call from outside, and the mid-October air brings a cool crispness through the screen door and raised windows. The night smells of damp leaves.

I can't help but cry, even though I know her moving is for the best, for her and for Stella's best. Dee's depression has become more extreme, lasting longer, and the dull gaze in her eyes seems to be pushing out what remains of their sparkle. But for the last three years, it has been me, Dee, and Stella. We three are a unit, a wall of stones, strongest when stacked together.

She says she is going to stay through the remainder of the month, that she will be leaving in two weeks for Cool Springs, North Carolina, where our parents live, a town of grazing cattle and churches. The town is an hour up the interstate, not too far, but far enough to take away what I have grown used to – Stella's small hand curled in mine in

the mornings, nights spent outside with my sister, watching the sky for bats, smoking, drinking, talking.

Two weeks later, I stay up all night helping Dee scrub her apartment, pack boxes, carry things across the road to the dumpster. Stella is at our parents' house for the weekend, allowing us to come and go as we need. To get to the dumpster, we must first walk down a steep flight of stairs that are built into a grassy hill right outside her apartment. Both of us have been drinking, although most of the alcohol is sweated out too quickly for anything beyond a mild buzz to take hold. Every twenty minutes or so, we stop to smoke on the back door's stoop, watching across the street where my apartment is, a light dew twinkling over the grass beneath the streetlights.

Late into the night, Dee decides to toss her mattress. I help her maneuver it through the rooms and out the back door, to the narrow incline of steps. We are both tipsy, tired, and soiled with sweat and the residue of cleaning supplies. The last thing I want is to have to maneuver this mattress down all those steps, across the road, and then heave it up into a dumpster. We stare down at the looming white staircase, questioning our decision to bring the mattress out.

Dee has always had strange preoccupations. Sea creatures. Bats. Cartwheels. Frogs. And hills. She loves to roll down hills. Many times, I have been over to her apartment, sitting on the front porch, watching her and Stella roll down a small slope that rises from the front sidewalk up to a flat plain of grass. Often wearing only a skirt and T-shirt, Dee has many times lain flat on the grass, reached her arms over her head and rolled down the

hill. She is not a small girl, and as much as I would like to describe her descent down the hill as “graceful,” it was not. Her skirt running up her pale, thick calves to her thighs, her shirt pulling up past her stomach, her large breasts squishing over and over against the dirt and twigs. At the hill’s bottom, she stands, brushing off the dirt, adjusting her clothing. “Come on, Stella, you’re next,” she calls to Stella, who stands atop the hill, watching skeptically at first, but then with glee. A little twig with a puff of blonde hair, Stella rolls fearlessly down the hill after her mother, laughing as she flips over and over until the grass levels out. Dee helps her stand, and then both turn to me, calling, “Your turn, Aunt Co.” But I remain at a distance, watching, having never been the kind to roll down hills.

“Let’s sled the mattress down the hill,” Dee suggests.

In the pale blue wash of the moon, my sister and I stand at the top of the hill, situating the mattress to point forward. Then we both stand behind it, crouch, and count to three. At three, we push with our legs and then jump on the mattress and ride it down the hill. It turns, wobbles, then slides to a slow stop before the curb. Dee and I navigate ourselves off it, still stuck on the incline, and slip the rest of the way down. We reach for the mattress, scoot it towards ourselves, and, limbs weak from laughter, manage to carry it across the road and to the dumpster.

A month after her move, Dee drives back to Charlotte in Mom's red minivan, Stella in tow, and spends the night. In the morning, Dee and Stella and I climb into the van to head toward the farmer’s market. It is a crisp, cool autumn day, and I think about the



light frost resting on the vegetables beneath the market's canopy, of having Stella help select peaches and plums.

This is what I'm thinking about when I notice Dee go straight through the first stop sign. I ask her what's wrong, but she says, "I'm fine, Coo," sounding as though she were awakened in the middle of a deep sleep. Her head falls back, then forward, and her eyes begin to flutter. I tell her to pull over, but she does not. Instead, she continues driving through stop signs, unaware that she is heading straight to the one of the busier streets in Charlotte. Stella, playing with toys in her car seat, senses something is wrong and begins to cry.

As I'm begging Dee to stop the car, our van approaches the main road, begins to turn left on it, then stops in mid-turn, cars approaching from both directions. I yell for her to go, and, as though she has just been jerked awake, she hits the gas and drives straight at a telephone pole. I reach for the wheel and turn. The van moves quickly down the road, through traffic, towards a bridge. As I tell her to stop, her chin bounces against her chest. She closes her eyes and slows down, but does not stop. I manage to turn the wheel to a side street and put the van in park. I walk around to the driver's door and pull her out, and then half-carry her to the passenger side on my shoulder. She slumps into the seat, breathing lightly, unresponsive. Stella calls to her from the backseat. Trying to reassure Stella that her mother is okay, I pull up to a nearby hospital's emergency room. After Dee is wheeled off, I park and call home. Mom checks her pill bottles and finds that her muscle relaxers from a previous back surgery are missing.

Mom and Dad arrive at the hospital within an hour. Dee is hooked up to an IV, is slowly regaining consciousness, and is upset that I called our parents, that I brought her

to the hospital. I carry Stella down the hall while they go to see Dee in her room. We look at the various tacky pictures hanging on walls, many of them geometric designs of purple, black and gold, shiny and metallic. Stella loves them. We talk about the different shapes and colors, try to deconstruct what we are looking at, try to make sense of it. (Stella will remember this moment years later, bringing it up to me after I have to get stitches at the hospital. “Remember when you showed me those pictures at the hospital, Aunt Coo,” she’ll say. “Remember when you carried me?”)

Dee admits to swallowing twelve of Mom’s muscle relaxers that morning, right before getting in the van to drive. She thought she could handle that many, that she’d built up a tolerance to them. Mom, Dee and I spend the next day at various mental health and substance abuse clinics, hoping for help but finding little. The first place we go to is a government-run rehabilitation center, a tin building set down a long dirt road and enclosed by a chain-link fence. We sit in a room crowded with patients and other family members, waiting for Dee’s name to be called. Through the thick glass window shielding the receptionist’s desk, I see a man screaming at a doctor, and I can hear cries and yells erupting from behind the doors of the blue-tiled hall. Dee spends less than ten minutes speaking with a “mental care advisor” and is slapped with a prescription for valium and an anti-depressant that she has not yet been on. She is given the option of staying at the facility, if she wants to, but the facility makes us uneasy, and is in the middle of a crime-riddled area in Charlotte. After some conflicted consideration of that plan – isn’t doing something better than doing nothing? – we all load up in the car and drive back to Cool Springs, wondering what to do next.

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Eventually, Dee will start to see a psychiatrist but then will stop her appointments. Her moods will improve and her addiction will seem to have waned. This was her “wake-up call” everyone says, including Dee. This is “the bottom of the barrel.” And you’d like to believe it is. But it seems that there is no barrel, and that if there was, there would be no way to measure it. The truth is, a person’s capacity to fall has nothing to do with barrels. The falling can go on forever, uninterrupted, until something has changed on the inside that serves as the ground. But the point of impact is fearful, hard, and one must wonder if a person would rather die than let herself hit.

A year and a half moves by, and I find myself preparing to move to New Orleans to attend graduate school. Dee seems to be doing better. Certainly, her moods still seem pivotal, but the good are out-weighting the bad, and when I speak with her on the phone from Charlotte, nothing really seems out of the ordinary. But she does not want me to move to New Orleans. She will miss me too much. She will have no one when I’m gone.

I feel guilty about leaving. Not just her, but her daughter, my family and my boyfriend of four years. But I have wanted to be part of an MFA program for some time, have worked hard at writing, have made it a priority, and to not go to New Orleans seems like a larger betrayal – one of myself – than does leaving.

Dee rides with me from North Carolina to New Orleans when I move. She stays with me at a friend’s house, and the two of us “do” Bourbon Street, tour graveyards, walk the

city's broken sidewalks. At times, she is weepy, but mostly, she seems glad to be there, enjoying New Orleans and our time together before she has to leave.

A week after arriving, I drive her to the airport in the middle of a thunderstorm. Traffic's backed up and I must lean in towards the wheel in order to squint through the walls of rain. I pull up to the drop-off area, put my flashers on, and run in with her. She is late. Before she rushes off toward the entrance gate, I pull her to me, feeling her wet skin against mine, and say, "I'll miss you." I watch her wander off in the direction of her flight, her skirt crooked, her blonde hair damp and disheveled, her T-shirt pulled tight against her chest and stomach. She looks at the blue screens of departing flights, and for a moment, I worry she'll get lost. But then she continues walking forward, to the gates, pulling her suitcase behind her. When she turns the corner, I go back outside, through the rain, and sit alone in my car, wiping at the fog that has collected on my windshield.

It is a tiny promise delivered in a paper cup. It siphons happiness out of the day-to-day, creates happiness, is happiness. It is only twelve dollars a pop. It is easy to get, if you know the right people. It is the jangle in a bottle, the slow count of how-many-are-left? It lies at the purse's bottom, hidden in stray tobacco and smeared lip-gloss. It is better with beer (*they* tell you you shouldn't, but what do *they* know?). It is everything you want to be, and could be, and, momentarily, are. It is the absence of itself, the shaking under a blanket during a fuck-I-ran-out kind of day. It is the first drop of rain before a storm, it is the atmosphere, gravity, what lifts you up in the morning. It is tying your shoes. It is brushing your teeth. It is the initial nudge, what sets everything into motion. It calms your shaking hands. It calms your running mind. It pulls your strings. It is your

strings. Take it away and you fall back into the pile of limbs you once were before it came into your life. It is your life. You may as well be dead without it.

On my first drive home from New Orleans, I receive a phone call right as I enter North Carolina. It is my father. He asks me to meet him at a hospital in Gastonia, an hour past Charlotte. When I ask why, he stammers, says something like, "It's your sister. Do you want to talk to her?"

"Okay," I say hesitantly, already sensing something bad is about to hit me from the other line.

"Hi, Coo," she says.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

"Oh, I tried to kill myself."

She says it as though she were telling me she was just reading a book, just sitting on the porch. There is no connection between what she is saying and the meaning of what she is saying. Her voice almost sounds perky, except that it quivers. She hands the phone back to Dad. I tell him I will meet him at the hospital.

My twelve-hour drive turns into a thirteen-hour drive, and I sit in the hospital's dim parking lot past midnight, waiting for the headlights of my father's truck. When he arrives, I climb out of the car and stand next to his door. Dee comes around the other side, and when I see her, I can only say in a shaking, crumbling voice, "I am so mad at you."

"I'm sorry," she says, but she doesn't mean it. She is apart from this moment, so drugged up she can feel nothing. It seems that I am feeling every emotion all at once, and

I collapse into my father's side, just for a moment, and then try to collect myself. The three of us walk toward the hospital, my sister pulling her suitcase behind her.

Two days later, I am sitting across from Dee during visitor hours. A middle-aged man sits at one end of the table, playing card games with his family. At the other end is a young man and his father. Both of the young man's arms are bandaged. There is also a woman who walks around from person to person, asking us why she is there. Dee thinks everyone there is crazier than she is, and that she shouldn't be there. Beyond this, she is in a really bad mood because they don't allow cigarettes and it's been two days since her last. She called me in tears, begging me to bring her one. She has been having panic attacks, and she is convinced that a cigarette – just one fucking cigarette – will get rid of them. Now we are sitting in the visitation area, and Dee can't stop staring at my chest, where I have hidden a cigarette in my bra.

I look around her, as casually as possible, at the nurse's station, and then reach quickly into my bra, and pull out a cigarette and a lighter.

"Hurry," I say. "And for God's sake, remember to turn on the bathroom's vent."

"Thank you, Sissy. I love you so much," she says, taking them and shoving them down her shirt. She hurries off to her room, and I remain sitting at the table, hoping she doesn't set herself, or the room, on fire. Hoping that she remembers to turn on the vent. Hoping the nurses don't smell the smoke.

Hoping, hoping, hoping.

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I have heard about survivors' guilt, although the term doesn't seem so appropriate since it was my sister who survived her suicide attempt and not me. Yet, since I got the phone call from my father, since I heard "the news," every day is chopped up into increments of varying levels of guilt. There is anger, fear, confusion. But what I have been feeling acutely since last October is guilt. I don't know how to articulate it, and perhaps there is no specific reason why I should feel in any way responsible for my sister's actions. Yet, I do. If I had been back home, in North Carolina, instead of leaving for graduate school in New Orleans, this would not have happened. Dee asked me not to go. "Don't leave me, sissy," she said more and more as the time of my move approached. Busy with so many other things that come with moving, I'd tell her, "Don't worry. I won't be gone that long." She would watch me packing, saying little, as I'd worry over suitcases and boxes, of what to bring with me, of what to leave behind.

I have always been the little fish swimming away while she has been the whale, navigating the waters slowly, sinking beneath the great weight of herself.

A year has passed since my move to New Orleans, the first summer since, "When Dee was hospitalized." This is how we've come to refer to her suicide attempt and the immediate time she spent in the hospital afterwards. This phrase, "When Dee was hospitalized," makes the most primal, human experience – death – seem more sterile, more controlled. We can accept that Dee was in the hospital, and we can refer to her stay there without referencing more unpleasant images, the stomach-dropping thoughts of vomit and notes, of apologies and police cars. We can say, "When Dee was in the

hospital,” and still go on doing the dishes, chopping the vegetables, noticing the sky and predicting what weather will fall.

During my first summer back from New Orleans, I rotate staying with my family and with my boyfriend. My sister is on a new anti-depressant and on anxiety meds, which she needs for the small, daily panic attacks she’s been having lately. Mom doesn’t have much insight as to why Dee has suddenly been having these panic attacks or what has brought them on. They started after I left North Carolina for New York, where I spent three weeks of the summer with my boyfriend. This is my second day back in town, and already I feel swallowed by Dee’s emotions, frightened by them, unsure what to do. I offer to drive her to the pharmacy. After we pick up her anxiety meds, she seems to calm down almost instantly. “I just want to be able to breath,” she says, the white pharmacy bag clenched in her hands.

The next morning, she is intoxicated. She seems to float through the house, rambles about random things, dances sloppily to the radio while I wash dishes. I go to her purse and check her pill bottle. She is supposed to take one pill nightly, but, in the time between last night and this morning, she’s downed thirteen. A flash of heat moves through me. Why, I wonder. Why?

I sit down behind her while she is cleaning up Stella’s toys, and I tell her I counted her pills. At first, she says she didn’t take that many, then she admits she did. The morning turns into time spent on the porch, drinking coffee and listening to my sister describe her absolute fear of living, of getting up in the morning, of going through another day. She cannot breath without her chest squeezing in on itself, and she took the



pills because she wanted, for at least one day, to feel normal. With all the empathy I can muster, I try to understand what it must be like to fear living, to not want to leave the house. To wake and face the day in terms of simply surviving it.

Later that evening, Dee is feeling better having talked to me and “gotten it out.” Mom and Dad are in the living room, watching television, and Dee, Stella and I are in another room, playing an educational board game that Stella can’t focus on. Instead, she wants to dance. We are listening to a list of songs from the computer, and Stella, now six, has been taking dance lessons and is smitten, to my horror, by Lady Gaga. Wrapped in a long scarf, draped in beads that I’ve sent to her from Mardi Gras, wearing a hula skirt and her swimming suit, Stella twirls around the room, whisking a ribbon through the air behind her. Eventually, Dee gives up on the game and she is up on the floor, dancing with Stella. I add more dance songs to the playlist, coming across the song, “Put the Lime in the Coconut.” And soon, we are at the beach, feet in the sand, raising our arms up to the moon – strange happy creatures turning and stomping to music. We grab a broom, and first Dee and I hold it as Stella limbos beneath it, then it’s Dee’s turn, then mine. The broom gets lower and lower, and yet we bend more than we think we can to pass under. Our laughter spills through the house; our feet shake the walls. And this is what it means to love, I think. Bending more than you think you can, approaching the stick and leaning back even as it drops farther down.

## Home

The sky is too open and the land is too empty. Tractors mumble across fields. Crows fill up trees. The mailman takes all day to come. We find ourselves surrounded by pastures and telephone poles. Leaves. Scraps of metal and strips of lumber piled against make-shift sheds. Everything waits to be put to use.

Too much blue above, too much green beneath. We feel the friction of open space, how too much of nothing can weigh you down. People pray for things to come. Meanwhile, we fix the same lawn mower for twenty years. Everything's as good as new. It doesn't take much to live, it just takes enough to get by. One grows weary.

Days take their sweet time to end, but at night, stars break through, twinkling so fiercely we can't help but look up.

You get what's on sale at the store, don't bother with lists, only vague desires. You drive out as far as your gas tank will allow, always turning back sooner than you'd like. You dig beneath car seats for change. You take clothes that are given to you, try to make them fit. You have no allegiance to brands. You buy in bulk. You become attached to the things that once were nice, hold on to them like fond memories. The recliner's worn out now. But wear and tear are inevitable. The point is, two decades ago, your mother bought it new.

Mom's inside, doing up dishes. She stands on swollen legs, squeezing a soapy rag in and out of cups, rubbing it against plates, pinching it along the blades of knives. Pans of pork

fat. Misshapen, microwaved bowls. Tupperware from her childhood, as good now as it was then. The sink water turns from clear to burnt sienna after the plates pass through. She drains the water, picks out pieces of gristle and meat from the drain, replugs and refills. Bubbles come up like clouds. Sun hits the room with everything it's got, but still, things seem dark. A thread of silk is illuminated in the window, holding a spider as it moves farther down.

We play God to these dead cars, try to give them back their lives. Dad stands before raised hoods, reaching his hands in tight spaces, feeling for a pulse. He brings up a screw, holds it between thick fingers up to the sun. Squints. He removes the car's organs, one by one, laying them out in the grass. Some things can wait to be replaced, some things can't. A belt not yet entirely worn; the aching carburetor; tires stripped bare.

One thing at a time. Meanwhile, we buckle up and pray for things to hold.

Let an apple go soft on the counter and a new generation of fruit flies evolves in a single afternoon. June bugs cling to door screens, their legs gripping the mesh of wire. The croak of cicadas, the held breath of the sky. Nothing moves. Granted, honeysuckles unfold, turn sweet inside, wait to be plucked, pulled and sucked dry. Life gets listless. Fireflies wobble beneath the silhouette of tree branches. A tire swing hangs. Mayflies live just one day, dying to fuck. Sweat collects on all of us. The heat comes and comes and comes.

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A pack of cigarettes helps ease disappointment. Sitting on the porch, Dee watches trucks roll by, dust rise up, clouds drift through the blue. Sometimes the phone rings, but she doesn't answer. There is Judge Judy on the TV, solitaire on the computer, pasta waiting to be boiled. There's the vacuuming that needs done, the book that needs reading, the pot roast she could thaw. Two towns over, there's a community college she could attend, a new self she could find, one that's better. Mom says there's still time to make something of herself. Mom believes Dee's smart enough to become a teacher if she'd only apply herself. And in the meantime, Wal-Mart's hiring. And maybe she should try Kentucky Fried Chicken, the Dollar Tree, some gas stations in town. She could waitress just like everybody else does, for crying out loud. Dee brings things on herself. There are plenty of options out there, she's just not looking.

Mom rushes off to work.

Dee lights another cigarette, considering her options.

Barn cats slink up through the yard, approaching the house like it's prey. A paper plate left on the porch, filled with rust-colored cat food. A white sauce pan placed next to it, scummy on the bottom, hairs of algae rising up through its water. Heads down, the kittens come, glut themselves, and turn back.

Cost is near sixty to spay the mother. That's two tanks of gas in the truck. That's the phone bill.

Dad approaches the barn, carrying a cage, and spends the afternoon gathering the furry ones. All the way to the pound, they sit in the backseat, paws pressed against wire, eyes bright or else matted shut, slick with green and yellow. Unfortunate to have been

born into such conditions. They meow in solidarity, imply that they never wanted it to come to this. But to Dad, wanting's irrelevant. Things come just the same.

There are also the dead here. Antlers drug in by dogs, a squirrel beneath a power line, the heads of mice left on the welcome mat. There was the blackbird that interrupted the afternoon, flying into the window, startling Dee out of her slump. I followed her outside to find the bird on its back, face turned to the side, beak flush with the earth, and two gray legs sticking straight up. Dee picked the bird up by its leg and carried it through the yard and tossed it over a fence. As it landed in the field, a murder of crows rose up from the yellow weeds and filled the branches of an oak. Watching us walk back, they shuffled from stem to stem, lifting and lowering their wings, all of them dressed in black, all of us quietly mourning.

From the kitchen window, you can see it coming. An approaching wall of gray mist moving closer over the field until it is in your yard and suddenly, splattering raindrops on the window you are looking through. You go outside to the carport and look out at the land, the horses standing beneath the trees in their pasture, heads down, grazing. The dirt road turns a deeper brown, the cars turn shiny, and a wet cat rubs along your leg, leaving a trail of white fur against your skin. Frogs leap up from the grass. Scents are stirred. Manure. Hay. Wet bark and leaves. Rain pounds lightly against the roof, swirls out the gutter, slips over the concrete and fills the space in between your splayed, naked toes.

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A sprinkler twitches in the back yard. Luminescent pearls fan up then disappear. In her bathing suit, Stella runs through the wall of light, squealing. Dee brings out a bowl of watermelon and sets it on a table. Watermelon, she calls out. Her daughter prances through the yard, blonde hair flat along the curves of her forehead and cheeks. She reaches for a pink carving, brings it to her mouth, and sinks in her teeth. Pink juice runs out, gathering and quivering on her chin. She takes another piece and walks to the porch steps, sits, and holds the watermelon with both hands up to her mouth. She bites into it and looks out at the yard. A black seed soars from her mouth. Another falls out after, attaching to her chin. She wipes the mess away with the back of her hand, turns to her mother, and smiles.

## Employment Security Commission

Months after Dad's accident, money begins to run out when the checks from the Employment Security Commission start coming in late, which is almost right away. Dad is to receive two checks a month, but usually only ever receives one. The ESC, we find out, is legally allowed to be up to three weeks late for every check it sends out. This is an allowance that they take advantage of. Five weeks fill up the space between each check, and the twice-a-month checks turn in to once-a-month checks. Some months go by with none at all. The checks aren't very much to begin with, but they're better than nothing. Money quickly dries up.

Dad walks out and checks the mailbox once, twice, a day, just in case he's missed seeing the mailman come. Sitting on the recliner, arm in a sling, his forehead still stapled, he watches the road through the window, the vague knowledge in his recovering brain that bills have to be paid, bills have to be paid. Even as his arm and head recover, even as he begins to walk to the mailbox without his cane, even as he gains the ability to pull open the mailbox with his left hand, he reaches in with his right and still finds the same problem: no check. No money. Walking back to the house, debt collector phone calls ring through the afternoon, as steady as the chimes of church bells.

Mom calls the house every day, just to see if a check has come in. Mom's income as an assistant teacher always runs out between the weeks that the ESC takes to mail out another check. The days become divided into two categories: "before the mail" and "after the mail." Every day turns into a mini-drama. Anticipation of the mail, walking

out to the mailbox, finding it empty, coming back inside. If no check arrives, a deeper heaviness settles on the day, and Dad begins looking toward tomorrow. If a check does come in, it is quickly taken to the bank, deposited, spent, and gone. The long wait for the next check begins by that evening.

Meanwhile, Stella's clothes are growing small. Dee begins buying generic cigarettes. Sometimes, there is no money for gas, no money for groceries, the power bill, the cell phones. I remember Mom once telling me over the phone that there isn't any food in the house except for some spaghetti noodles and canned vegetables. Calls to their lawyer about the late checks from ESC are fruitless. So long as they receive a check within the five-week period, there is no recourse to be taken. For the next two years after Dad's accident, this is how things go.

The worst part, for me, since I am going to school in New Orleans, are the phone calls from Dad, him stumbling through a hello, and then asking, voice shaky, if I could lend them some money till his next check arrives. I know Mom makes him call because it hurts her too much to ask.

Pulling from my student loans, I am able to wire them money most months. I live alone in a little studio apartment and don't need very much money. Yet, feeling Dad's shame through the telephone lines, the humility of having to ask his daughter for money, resonates through me. I feel his shame. I tell him, "No need to apologize, it's not your fault." I tell him, "Of course. How much do you need? Is three hundred enough? Four hundred?" I say it maybe too quickly, just to get to the other side of the call. I become a regular sight at the CVS down the street from where I live, walking in and using the bright red phone to call in a Moneygram, always feeling as though people are watching



me, as if they know that somewhere, there is no money. The walk to the red phone becomes a march of desperation. I make the call, pay the cashier, and then text the receipt number to Dad so he can pick up the money at a nearby Wal-Mart or Food Lion, at any place that offers the Moneygrams service. I tell him "no problem," when he texts back, "Thank u." I tell him don't worry about it.

You realize that you can never really learn how to live without money; it is like being held below water just to the point where you think you might drown then being allowed up again to gulp in a few breaths before you find yourself pushed back in, staring through the water, just waiting to be let up to the other side.

## Take It Back

Let's take it back, Penelope. Back to the morning of bright white light, that day hanging in my mind like a picture, all blue and green and sunshine. A perfect portrait of a day, if we could erase the telephone poles, their ugly lines, and the cages that held dogs across the field. Let's go on and touch up Sister too, because God only knows she was a mess that day (Penelope, mighty huntress of rodents, what things we could learn from you about strength!). There Sister and I sat, like fleshy gargoyles on door steps. We entered the morning holding cigarettes and cups of Kool-aid, hunkered down on our haunches, struck flames and settled our eyes down onto the dirt road, down onto the field kissing it, down away from the sun because Sister and I each have Father's blue eyes (Sister's paler, mine darker) and somewhere I once read that with less pigment, the eyes cannot bear too much light.

Now this is important, Penelope. This is the thing that makes you callous, the thing I admire most about you: there was cat food left out that day – we all know this. It's no secret. Sister spread the little pieces of ground-up pellets (I read once that they grind baby chicks alive to make this meal for you – or did I watch this somewhere? Somewhere, the information was passed down to me and now when I see bagged animal food, I can only think of chicks peeping as they are swept into a mincer) over the iron lattice table, spreading the food up high so Charlie the Chihuahua, the more-loved pet, could not trot over and lick it up with his pink tongue.

The food was intended for you, not the other cats. How many cats at that time were there now, Penelope? You'd know. Nothing escapes you (a point to which I am

getting). Let's walk back in our minds to the barn. The barn cats, not true pets. Scavengers, roamers, drifters. None with names. (Okay. There was the one cat with the green matted eyes that we ended up caring for and naming Fluffy, and Fluffy sent you running off Penelope, back into your mice fields. After Fluffy was run over by Mother's tires [your voodoo?], you came, slightly pissed, back to us.) Those cats don't count as pets, though they came out in the daytime and took the cat food Sister left out on the porch for you. Those strays may have taken it, but Sister left it for you, Penelope. Do you know? Did you realize this, even as you tracked blood? Even as you trotted across the dirt road, self-confident to the core?

Everything is a great effort on Sister's part, or haven't you heard? Simply thinking can be effort (you've heard us talk medication – you were the one rubbing our legs the night we got drunk on these steps and cried over Sister's second chance at life, the thing she no longer wanted). Even when she was struck dumb with depression, I have watched her grab handfuls of cat food to spread out for you on the table, Penelope. Spread out, or sometimes simply drop.

Can you take it back, Penelope? Coming and going, more barn-cat yourself than the yellow-eyed-ones. Where is your commitment to family? Did you not love us? Sister never forgot about you, not even on the days you turned tail and ran.

Something I could not do.

You ran into the cover of high weeds and soft dirt, death as much on your mind as it was on mine that day, that week, the week before. (Sometimes I think the sky in early fall is clearer than summer, and because it is clearer, it is brighter. As if the sun moves faster through thin-blooded atmospheres, shocking us back into life just before winter

arrives to pull our feet to the ground.) Picture the twisting red lights of an ambulance, Penelope, moving down a country road. Red as licorice. Red as a licked lollipop, cherry flavored. Red as glass beads, nail polish, blood. Autumn can't hold these things down. The air is thinner now. Everything spans out. Everything is not really itself, come this time of year.

Life continues, despite us not seeing it. But you know this, don't you, Penelope? You know what is out there, living and dying (it's much harder for me to know, with Sister sitting there on the steps, staring stone-faced at the day, still living, but by how much? measured against what?) (If I can reach out and touch her, then she is still living. So there.) I imagine being out here in this tractor-puffing place of hum-drumminess that there are hundreds of little deaths every day. We only notice the bigger deaths, being humans. Associate importance with size. A horse died. A cow died. But it was just as sad when Fluffy was run over. Mother fought back tears. And then the smaller things that rise up from the earth – worms, frogs, hopping birds. Death is sad for those things, too (certainly, certainly).

This is important, Penelope. Let's get down to it.

You come and go, come and go. And when you come, you always bring death with you. This is what motivates you, the kill. I sometimes wonder if Sister had wanted herself to be that little mole twitching between your long white teeth that afternoon we sat porch-bound, blowing blue smoke, squinting from the brighter, weakening sun. Were you death that day? Trotting out of the field, trotting straight toward us, like an arrow, the little naked creature screaming inside your mouth? Of course, its scream was little (like Sister's). I didn't realize it myself until you were on the porch with us, only steps

away and coming, that the death you carried was not all dead, just crushed, its only want to be on the other side of torment.

You came right up to me and dropped the thing at my feet, Penelope. I stood, screamed, backed away. Sister leaned down, watched it rolling, and said to me, "I don't think we can save it."

Take it back, Penelope. I'm asking you now to please take it back.

## Ice Cream

When there is no money, all you can do is think about money. You wait for Stella to ask for ice cream at the gas station, and count out dimes, pennies and nickels throughout the day, anticipating the moment. Just barely having enough for an ice cream cone doesn't make the ice cream sweeter, doesn't make anyone appreciate it anymore. She unwraps the cone as you walk out to the truck, and the next day boils inside of you, when there won't be enough to buy this after-school snack, when, driving home, you'll have to think up a reason to tell her why you didn't stop.

## Recall

Several months after his accident, Dad is still not allowed to drive a car. His vision remains blurry, but his left arm and hand are slowly healing. He can hold things now. He can lift his arm straight out from his shoulder. His memory still fails him. Mom puts lists in his pocket so he remembers things he needs to do. Take his pills. Take out the trash. Call someone. And there are the long pauses over the phone lines when I call home. The repeated phrases for when he loses the thread of his sentences, his safety net of words that ground him back into the conversation: "And so. . ." "How are you?" "What you doing today?" And I fill in the blanks, say inconsequential things about the weather, tell him several times that I'm fine, re-adapt earlier statements about that day's plans, try to make them sound new.

## What to do?

He sleeps in his recliner often, watching television and drifting off. Sometimes he goes outside with his cane, walking to his tool shed, looking at the tools, then coming back inside. He microwaves hotdogs, eats them in three bites at a time.

He mows the yard. He mows the yard again, a few days later. He circles the yard in the riding lawn mower, his arm suspended in its sling, and turns onto the road. There is not much out here. Cow fields. Houses scattered, set deep into yards. His silhouette moves slowly down the road, the sun setting behind him, cars coming up and passing in the other lane. He drives one mile. Then another. He looks at the yards, their grass, how far it's grown. When the gas gauge gets too close to the last dash, he turns back. Comes in the house, feels refreshed. Thinks about the yards out there. He wouldn't charge anything to mow them. It'd be something to do. He makes a cup of decaf instant coffee and goes into the living room, settles back into his recliner. He puts the cup on the stand by his chair and falls asleep before the liquid's had a chance to cool.



## Shot

The lawn mower slowly begins conking out. Not starting. Shutting off for no reason. Not going as fast as it once did. Dad spends days at his shed, the hood of the mower raised, his one arm still in its sling while he uses his other hand to twist screws, take things out, put things in.

He goes to Diane's Diner to drink coffee in the mornings with the old men in the area. Now that he is no longer working, he, too, can join these men for hours at a time in the mornings, before and after sunrise, cutting at the same piece of country ham for half an hour, going through creamer after creamer.

Someone asks, "How's that mower, Wes?"

Dad sips hot coffee, slurping it through his lips. He thinks about his lawn mower. Tells the men, "It's shot."

They nod, remembering their own worn-out lawn mowers over the years, how they had to squeeze every bit of life out of them before either buying a new one or, more likely, resorting back to the push-mowers kept in barns, back-up plans for the expected day when the nicer mower would eventually conk out, leaving them with fresh grass to mow.

## Shorn

Dad sits center-kitchen, shirtless. Mom stands behind him, nightgowned, barefooted, her hair permed, uncombed, wild from another night's sleep. Because it is cold outside, winter, a bright gray sunlight out through the windows, she shears him inside, under the kitchen light, the linoleum sweepable enough, Dad's skin, brushable enough. She uses dog shears. A thick, short handle, pickle-sized, with a whirring blade, its black cord looped around Dad, snaked up the counter, plugged into the outlet overlooking a bowl of oranges. The shears, turned on, hum through the house. Mom runs it through Dad's white hair, strands flying like splinters of glass into the kitchen light, catching the light, then falling onto his shoulders, his back, his arms. Another buzz cut, a silver helmet he wears every other month, his forehead longer, his ears suddenly more pronounced. When she is finished, Mom turns off the shears, leans forward, and blows.

## Diane's Diner

Since his accident, Dad spends most mornings at Diane's Diner, a little brick restaurant half a mile down the road from the house. Home from New Orleans, I go with him one morning for breakfast. We enter the building, find a two-top with a plastic table cloth folded over its surface and sit. Two waitresses are smoking in the corner of the room, sitting cross-legged next to the coffee pots, hair pulled back in tight ponytails, their t-shirts pulled snug across their chests. There is also a little girl, on the verge of having breasts, but for now, stick-skinny, standing rigid as one of the women, who, cigarette in hand, ties an apron around the girl's narrow waist.

This is summer, so there is no school, only work. For some, like this little girl with her beautiful smile, one that makes me want to apologize for asking her for coffee, for telling her no cream when she walks up to take our order. Dad gets coffee too, and when the little girl comes back, two Styrofoam cups in hand, steaming, and sets them on our table, Dad says, "Thank you," and begins opening the packs of creamer that the girl pulls from her apron, spilling them onto our white table cloth like golden coins, like sea shells, like something precious.

Sitting across from Dad, menu in hand, I consider the hash browns, eggs. End up just sticking with coffee while Dad goes for eggs, toast and grits. I'm surprised by his ordering of the grits. In Pennsylvania, where he was born and where he lived most of his life, grits were unheard of. A phenomenon of the South. Mom, for as much as she's turned into a Southerner herself, still turns her nose up at grits, refuses to cook them, to even try them.

In a few minutes, the girl returns, placing the steaming Styrofoam plate before Dad, the grits filling one compartment of it, a pad of butter in its center, pooling.

"I didn't know you ate grits," I say.

"They ain't too bad," he says. "Can't taste them anyway." He looks at the wall behind me, like he might say something else, and shrugs. Goes back to eating.

"Since the accident?" I ask.

"Yeah. Can't really taste nothing since it. I mean, some things I can taste, but not really."

There is an indentation on his forehead, from hairline to the bridge of his nose, from where his skull was cracked open two years back. Now the skin sinks into where the crack in the skull was, creating a deep cleavage, dividing one side of his head from the other.

He's gotten braver now that he can't taste things. One day, I left a block of tofu out on the counter, uncooked, and he cut off a corner of it and ate it. When I walked back in the room, he told me it tasted like cheese. At a cook-out in the backyard, he tried one of my soy-hotdogs, made a face, and said he didn't like the texture of it. Sometimes I sneak hot chili sauce into stir-fries, wondering if he will notice the heat. He doesn't. Maybe it's all just texture to him now. He has a tendency to mix things together on his plate, to just get it in his mouth and get it swallowed as quickly as possible. The only recent thing I've seen him truly savor is an onion he microwaved in a bowl one afternoon, peeling off its skin and sticking it in an old plastic bowl with spoonfuls of margarine. I caught him taking it from the microwave, the onion quartered, luminescent and steaming, slipping petals of it into his mouth.

"They ain't too bad," Dad says about the grits, scooping his toast over his runny egg yolk, packing it into his mouth like he must have as a child, just before rushing out with his brothers to the dairy farm his family owned in the rolling hills, a farm that he abandoned school for in the sixth grade, that causes him now to ask me questions from his computer, questions like, "How do you spell couch?"

He looks past me, at the wall, as if the right words might be there to get at this, the grit situation, or something beyond it. The moment passes. I stare off, too, sipping at my coffee.

The kitchen is open, separated from the restaurant by only a counter top and old cash register, with an old woman standing behind it, leaning back, watching the smoke rise up from the bacon sizzling on the long flat grill. Every morning, Dad and other men from the area – jobless, retired, injured from factory work or farm – come in as the sun rises, order coffee, biscuits and gravy, eggs and bacon, and spend the hours contemplating their coffee, the walls, the little girl in her apron, so young.

Dad nods at these men when they walk in. They nod back. Exchange a "howdy" with one another, ask him how it's going. "Not too bad," Dad always says, eyes sparkling. He introduces me to them, using the line, "This is my daughter – got her good looks from her mother." The men nod. I smile.

There is something about this place I want to call home but can't. I want to fit in, want to talk to Dad about life, his life, about anything, but nothing comes. What is there to say? I have Dad's blue eyes. I used to have his laid-back nature. People used to say I was a Daddy's Girl, but now, at twenty-eight, it's as though someone's pulled my skin

tight around me and laced it up my spine, making me unable to bend at times, unable to relax. Making me unable to order grits.

I want to be better as this – this life – to fall back into the lazy routine of it. Dee can talk to Dad at length about anything – horses, neighbors, stray cats. Her words come out easily, as though she were holding them in like marbles, letting each conversation drop easily from her mouth out onto the table. I feel my own words, thoughts, pull apart, and small-talk unravels. My life is so different now, so far away, and yet right there, also, sitting right across from me. I feel myself stretching thin between my new life and old life, unable to bridge them, filling my mouth with coffee as an excuse for the words which will not come.

At meal's end, I ask the server-girl for a refill of coffee. Dad does too. When we rise, he leaves a dollar for a tip, and I feel bad over it. I follow him outside, after the slow walk from table to door, the "See ya's" to the men who look up from their plates, the waitresses looking up from their chairs, the old woman behind the register. The smoke from the bacon fat keeps rising long after we've left, headed back home, plunged into the day, full-throttle. The memory of the girl – an apron around her skinny, straight waist, the image of the dollar on the table, will be there for me when I again return home, for the next time Dad asks me in the early morning, rumbling around the house for his keys, if I'd like to go get breakfast, if I'd like to get a cup of coffee with him.

## Porch Talk

Exterior – front porch – afternoon

An old man and a young woman sit on the front porch of a one-story brick house. The porch has white iron lattice railing bordering it, a black Chihuahua, and the dismembered parts of a field mouse left by a cat days ago. The man and woman sit at a round table. The girl has a lap top computer in front of her, and the man has a can of diet coke.

Surrounding them are fields.

Old Man

What'ya doin'?

Young Woman

Oh, just writing. (she stops writing, looks up, settles back into her chair)

Old Man

What'ya writin' about?

Young Woman

Oh, nothin, really. Just a story.

Old Man

What do you write about?

Young Woman

Just stories, you know. Nothin in particular.

Old Man

But what do you write about?

Young Woman

Just stuff.

Old Man

Just stories?

Young Woman

Yeah.

Old Man

But how do you word it into words? I mean, I've got stories but I don't really know how to word them into (hand gestures, like he's trying to coax the words out of his mouth) words (defeated).

Young Woman

What kind of stories?

Old Man

Like when I was in the army. I got plenty of stories about that, but I don't know how to word them into words.

Young Woman

What kind of stories?

Old Man

When I was stationed in Germany. I had to sit in a tower all day, looking out at a field. The mist would freeze. For a whole week, you'd never see the sun. We stayed in a tower on a mountain in Germany in the middle of clouds and the mist would freeze on the fence posts and the roads. Sometimes we could see the sun on the tops of clouds. I read a book while I was up there. Book after book after book. You weren't allowed to have any books or radio up there. Everybody did it. It made me feel like I was back home.



## Approximation of Mom's Monthly Budget

10 – 02 – 10 checking's balance: \$6.02

10 – 03 – 10: deposit my check to bank: \$536.94 (2 weeks)

(still waiting on Wes's check to come in from worker's comp – five weeks late now – call!!!!)

Priorities:      Power Bill – late – \$97.12 – pay online (cut off date, next Tuesday)  
                         My medicine, insulin strips –\$35.00 – Wal-Mart

Wal-Mart:

(Wes)

sandwich bread / meat (turkey or ham)

cheese slices (Muenster)

(Stella)

Apples (what's on sale)

cereal

milk

macaroni cheese (Kraft) – (five boxes; maybe six)

snacks for her school: Fruit roll-ups? rice cakes? ???

little toy, maybe. depends.

(Dee)

cigarettes

(Me)

sugar-free lemonade

sweet and low

lettuce / shredded cheese / blue cheese dressing?

(Dinners)

hotdogs (3 packs? what's on sale?) / buns

(use stella's mac and cheese for dinners too?)

three boxes spaghetti noodles / 3 jars sauce

(check to see if we have canned veggies, potatoes in garage? see what else is out there \*

maybe hash one night?)

???

( Me)

insulin strips (35\$)

Household:

toilet paper

dish soap

Try to keep under eighty dollars!!!

That's: 542.96

-97.12

= 445.84

- 80.00  
= 365.84

House Payment – 400.00 – due on the tenth...

Wal-Mart:

(Wes)

bread / American cheese – 6

(Dee)

smokes - 6

(Stella)

mac-n-cheese, apples. toy? - 10

(Me)

insulin strips- 35

six boxes spaghetti noodles, six jars sauce – should be no more than \$15.

toilet paper – cheapest – 6

= 78

- Call power company – see if I can send partial payment until middle of month, with next check\*\*\* - CALL TODAY - \*\*\*

Okay.

House payment – send in – 400.00

Wal-Mart – 80

542.96

- 400

= 142.96

- 80

= 62.96 - twenty in gas for Wes, twenty in gas for me -

= 22.96

Five dollars for Dee for CHEAP cigarettes, five dollars for Wes for miscellaneous, five for Me

miscellaneous

= 7.96 (emergency fund).

\*Call lawyer about workmen's comp. Three checks behind!!! Can't do this anymore. Can't. Can't. Can't.

\* maybe borrow money from Coleen (see if she can send \$400. hate to ask. Other options?)

10 – 6- 10:

400 + 21 – 421 (pay power bill / credit card) (more groceries!!!!)

- fill up tanks in both cars!

- buy Dee carton of cigarettes (she'll have to make them last!)
- two little ceaser's \$5 pizzas for Friday night? yes. Movie and pizza night

10-17-10 balance: -37.39 (how did this happen? check with Wes – forgot to write something down?)

Deposit: 536.94

= 499

- Stella's soccer cleats : 40ish?

Fill up tanks! 90.

Groceries: Wes lunch / Stella lunch – what for dinner?

ground beef

hamburger helper

macaroni cheese

frozen veggies

canned veggies

stuff to make tacos one night.

cubed steak

(try to keep low, no more than sixty or seventy?)

cough medicine / allergy medicine for Dee \*

eye drops\*

Balance:

horse feed

Cracker Barrel (need to get out of the house!!!)

winter clothes for Stella – she's growing out of everything!

Balance:

\* send email to worker's comp. send email to lawyer.

\* send email to preacher, that he may keep us in thoughts and prayers (I don't know how we're going to get through this.)

Preacher Chuck says: have patience. Leave it in God's hands. (easier said than done, but I will try.)

## Dead Horses

Through the summer and fall, three of them die.

Imagine balloons falling down from the sky. Whales washing up along shorelines. An avalanche of boulders. The death of a horse is smaller in comparison. Especially with these horses. In this place.

We opened the earth to bury them, left red-clay heaps along the border of trees, just past the barn, where we pushed the dirt back in. Who could have guessed that next autumn we would walk along the moss and leaves, searching for their graves? That the earth would so soon recover from the gashes we laid into it?

They were cheap so maybe we shouldn't have expected them to last. Ones given to us or else adopted from rescue stables. Not by us, but by Mom, the equine-junkie of the family. Even when the cabinets contained only macaroni noodles and rice, cans of green beans and pickled beets, she went out searching for horses to replace the ones she'd lost. She needed at least two in the pasture to keep herself steady, to keep from truly falling apart.

A green barn-shack across the dirt road was her second home, or maybe her first, and in the evenings, she went to it, gathering the apple slices in her pockets and calling out the names of her beasts, "Missy! Doc! DJ!" (All my life, I've heard her calling out the names of horses. Even now, I can hear her calling the names of those long gone, "Hightower," "Maggie," "Jeb," and see the ghosts of these animals come thundering in,

green saliva slipping down their lips). The animals would come to her, touch their noses to her opened palms, and lift the slices one by one with their loose, trembling lips.

With eye cancer, Doc was the first to go. Mom brought me up to the pasture and showed me his eye, as though my second-opinion might hold weight. His eyes were blue as glaciers, the kind some buyers avoid on rumors that glass-eyed horses are quick to go blind or crazy, take your pick. This horse hadn't cost us much, if anything, was just an old gelding Mom took in for the purpose of having company, both for herself and the other horse, DJ.

She pulled down the skin around Doc's blue eye and told me to look. The cancer was small, just a milky bump set into the corner of pink flesh. Not even the size of a pea. The vet had confirmed the cancer. They'd scheduled a date to have him put down.

It's better to put him down than have him suffer, became Mom's affirmation that year.

Once Doc was put down, Mom waited a day or two and then took off in her truck, aiming to find herself another. She drove to rescue stables, where abandoned horses stood in stalls, having not much to offer. Split hooves. Fur mites. Bellies full of ulcers. Years of standing in mud had turned some hooves to mush. Others were just beat down by rodeos, a little lame, nothing one could ride. Mom parked her truck and went to them, heavy-hearted, looking for one that might last.

\*\*\*

Missy, an old brood mare, lasted about a month before she began leaking blood all over the pasture. The sun cooked the clumps of blood into red patties. We came upon them one afternoon, the flecks of red twinkling almost like hidden jewels throughout the grass.

"It must be Missy," Mom said. She walked over to the mare, who stood nibbling grass, and lifted her tail, finding dried blood along her legs.

"Well, I guess I'll call the vet," she said. "See what can be done."

The vet drove in the next day and concluded there to be tumors. Best to put her down quick as possible. End her suffering. What Mom had here was another hopeless case.

Burials became our biggest transactions of the year. Never enough money for anything outright, we depended on those who took pity. The vet not charging for the last horse, calling it her Christmas present to us. The grave digger, driving his tractor in at dusk each time, only charging half-price.

"Times are hard for everyone right now," he once reckoned while Mom wrote him out a post-dated check. She nodded but knew that wasn't exactly the case. Times were hardest for us.

The night they put Missy down, DJ ran circles in the pasture.

He stood at the fence line, neck and head leaning over the wire, and watched Mom lead Missy up to the woods, watched as she fell – one leg, then another and another – watched as the dirt was pushed over her. No one thought to tie him in the barn, where he would not have been able to see. He pressed so close to the fence that barbs dug into

his fur, pressed their spires into his thick, tender skin. Pawing the ground, he saw everything.

All night and for days after, he ran through the pasture, tail trailing behind him, crying out. He only paused when passing the gravesite, watching the large mound of red soil and perhaps thinking that at any moment, his companion might rise up through the dirt, that she might still come back to him.

DJ, on the blade of winter, just as frost threw a web over the mornings, stopped eating and turned thin. Another trip from the vet confirmed cancer. It was as if the cancer had turned infectious, as though it were something the horses were spreading to each other behind Mom's back.

Mom waited to see if he might eat, bringing him sweet oats, carrots, corn husks. As the temperature turned colder, and the horse grew thinner yet, she decided to go on and get it over with before the ground had a chance to freeze.

On that night, truck headlights bobbed along the pasture then turned off at the edge of the woods. Mom left the house and walked across the road, wearing rubber boots, cotton pants, an old flannel coat. Once in the pasture, she began calling out his name.

I stood on the porch across the field, watching her move into the wash of barn light, the horses approaching her slowly. In the woods, the lights of the tractor flicked on, like two yellow eyes beaming through the trees, as if searching for who would be next.

## Dust

The dust speaks to us here. Rising up from the road, its after-thought to embrace that which has just crossed over it: a truck, a car, a convoy of horses. Dry, loose, it's the skin of most things, what comes off with the original touch. Pointless to wash cars, pointless to wash windows, though hose water helps for spraying off dust-covered hands, hands that have just touched the horse trailer, the lead rope, the cat, the car, the mailbox, hands that must hold dust before holding anything else.



## First Horse

Our first horse is something I do not remember but hold images of nonetheless. Perhaps this image has gathered in my head through the years, first just a field, then a fence, enter a horse, a gray sky, lightning in the distance. I don't remember Mom ever telling me about this horse, but I feel like there was a horse we had in Pennsylvania, perhaps a neighbor's, that we would go out to see. I was perhaps two at the time, which would put Dee at three, and Mom around twenty-four or twenty-five.

I'm trying to get back to the beginning, though I'm not quite sure this is it. Here is the horse, the field, as I imagine it:

A field so green it must have just rained. Tall weeds rise up against a gate made from old soldered pipes. In the distance, the hills of Pennsylvania roll in patches of yellow, tan, walnut, olive. A dirt road runs through it, up to us, the yard, the white farm house where Aunt Beulah lives. Across the road, a silo, a barn, cows by the dozen. The moisture of the rain is in the air, cool. This is a day that feels like contentment. Mom walks ahead, and Dee and I run behind through rubbed-away earth, the trail that leads to a gate and horse pasture.

The horse is standing there, leaning its head over the gate.

In the memory, this is where Mom disappears. I can't see her. Dee walks off to the rosebushes climbing the farmhouse, pulls them free from vines, shakes the bugs out of them. The horse, gray, egg-shell mane, shakes its head, looks out. I reach up and touch its soft nose with my fingers.

I am no longer two or three. I am six or seven. Older. Maybe older than that. Sixteen. Twenty-one. Running my hands across the jaw, up around the ears. I am twenty-seven. Twenty-eight. Dee is upstairs, sleeping, under a blanket of bad dreams. Mom's rushing out a door, answering a phone, walking up to a barn. I am taking the horse's head into my arms, walking up to it, running my hands down its neck. It steps back. Fades out.

I am here now, writing this. Staring at some empty field, thinking I saw something but finding it was nothing. But I can still feel the day on my skin. The grass is still overgrown, overly green.

I step back. Look harder. I wonder if this is a place where I have ever been, where I have ever really belonged.

## Light Source

The air sticks to my skin as I walk to my car. Summer-soaked, this air, a congealing of August heat and rain. The horses are across the dirt road, beneath barn light, noses nuzzled in dew-lit grass. I pull my hair up, sit in the car, and roll its windows down. Pull out on the dirt road, then the paved. For miles, lightning bugs blink.

I am going on a beer run because there is nothing out here to do but drink or watch TV, and I so I wind up doing both. Dee drinks with me. We've developed a habit of late-night horror movies. We watch them nightly, soak ourselves with PBR and cigarettes, take breaks to sit on the porch, to smoke, to look out. Dee's got another habit, the pill-popper. Though sometimes she seems fine. If I drink, I can almost forget it. Will things improve? Easier to drink, to watch horror movies and project your fears onto them.

A tin roof, its underbelly lit with fluorescent light, provides shelter for the gas pumps. Here, the air is pixilated, every molecule plump with water and light. Parked pump-side, I step into this gas station atmosphere. As I do, a moth, Luna, pale green and yellow, drops suddenly at my feet. I step back, then step closer, then bend down to watch it.

Maybe if this were some ordinary speck of a moth, I wouldn't care. Some pearly pebble-sized thing with wings, darting at the light with a cloud of others, stupid more than tragic, unnoticed once gone. But the Luna moth, flapping slow, pressed to the pavement, is giant, glowing, so I must watch.

I've seen Luna moths before, but only rarely. Once, as a child, I saw one dead in a store-front window, so large it could have been on display. I touched its wing-tip, lifted it, spread it out on my hand. Brittle, the wing flaked between my fingers, and I set it back down.

The moth's wings power up, moving slow, nearly creaking, a measure of strain behind them. It launches. I step back, look up.

It flies at the fluorescent light above the gas tanks, sputtering, clumsy, as though every flap held great effort. The light moves through it, cell by cell, until it could almost disappear, merging itself with the light. At impact, the moth tips, bumbles along the ceiling and spirals loopity-loop back down. It flattens itself, shivers. Its wings are like two green eyes looking up at me, brown spots set near their centers that must pass for pupils. This is the moth's defense, I imagine. This is how it frightens predators away.

The moth, resolved, stands once more on its six stilt legs and blusters back into the air, back toward the light, and sputters back down.

After its slow careening, I take it by a wing. Its wings seem to look up at me, glaring perhaps, as I walk it through the parking lot, to a surrounding field of grass. There, I think, setting it under the moon, which is really what it's after. Look up, look there. That's the direction you want.

It lies there, hesitating, waiting for me to leave. And I do. I leave it to go inside and buy beer. And when I come back out, the moth has returned to its old ways. Flying at the light, knocking against the ceiling, toppling down again and again. Dumb thing, I

think, and then think this: no matter how many times you carry a thing to safety, there is nothing you can do to guarantee it will stay.

## Where the Sidewalk Ends

The summer and all anyone can do is television watch and check the mail. Stella runs barefooted across crisp yellow grass, coming outside while I smoke, abandoning cartoons for just a moment to let her skin soften under hot rays as she skips over the miniature sidewalk that curves away from our porch. It's a sidewalk that doesn't go anywhere. It comes white and smooth off the porch, turns, cuts through twelve feet of yard and stops suddenly, the yard all around it, nothing to mark its ending, like a life unexpectedly cut short.

Stella walks the sidewalk on tiptoes, stepping over its cracks, her arms clumsily balanced out to the side, her fingers forgetful of themselves, curling and uncurling, combing the air. When she reaches the end, she stops, watches the yard, and turns quickly, running fast back the other way.

I was five once, too, and I can guess what she sees out there, under all this sky and heat and nothing-to-do-ness. The yard is an ocean of sharks, a sea of hot lava, a pit of striking snakes. She cannot step into it. So back and forth she goes, balancing herself on the brink of death as another afternoon drags on, fearless on this path that could lead to destruction, fearless on this path that makes her feel so alive.

## Accent

Since moving to North Carolina from Pennsylvania, Mom has picked up a Southern accent that makes Dee and me cringe. It doesn't emerge until Mom starts "talkin ridin" with her "horse friends." Her words take on a strange transformation around these people, stretching out, getting comfortable, a little lazy. She uses phrases, "Well, Girl, I'll tell ya what," when addressing female friends, and "Oh boy, let me tell ya," when addressing males. This can happen at any time, anywhere, just at the drop of the word "horse." Coming in from the barn at night, she might say, "That horse was somethin tonight. Just plain full of it, let me tell ya." To folks riding horses past our house, she might call out, "Hey, ya'll! How ya'll doin'? Getting ya a ride in, I see!" The accent grows thicker every year. "Washer" is now, permanently, "Warsher." "Shed" sounds like it's been stepped on – "Sheeeyed."

Dee and I remind her she moved here from Pennsylvania, that this talk not only misrepresents who she is but also who we are. Though we moved here as toddlers, Dee and I never picked up the North Carolina drawl. People, often teachers, sensing our outsider status, ask knowingly, "And where ya'll originally from?"

Mom can fool her horse-riding friends all she wants, but she can't fool us. We mock her, tease her, correct her pronunciations. It's like trying to teach a child to use phonetics.

"Riding – ing!" we cry. "Not 'Ride-in'!"

Mom claims to be unaware of the difference in her speech, though she often refers to herself as "just talkin horse" when asked what she and her friends did while riding that

day. If pushed by our taunting, she'll respond, "I can't help it." Then she'll wave us off, grinning, and say, "Now ya'll hush and let me be."



## Picture of Mother

If you were to paint a portrait of my mother, make sure she is walking through a field, a flannel coat covering her broad back. Her cheeks are pink, her knuckles dry. Cotton pants and rubber boots. Let there be horses with thick coats and tender eyes in motion toward her. Tree branches shifting in the wind. Give her a bucket to carry, filled with oats. Hide apples slices in her pockets. Put a little scrap barn a few yards before her, made from green siding and old lumber, a roof that rattles when it rains. Grass blades are bent over backwards from the wind, sunlight reflecting off their middles in waves. Put flies over shit piles. Dot each one in, black black black. Land them on horse flanks, splintered wood, around the horses' eyes. Drop them in the water troughs, let them float at the surface among pine needles. Spread their wings open, wide open, so if you were to lift them up and place them somewhere else in the picture, it might look as if they'd always been flying, that they had never been stuck in some old trough, drowning.

## Dishes

White sunlight makes the house go blind, and we find ourselves aimless wanderers inside of it, knowing what needs doing but not seeing anyway of getting to it. Dishes pile up and we feel sorry over them but can't bring ourselves to clean. Take the summer. Take the heat. Consider the flies. And with so much of the day leaning up against us, all the days piled up against this one, who has the energy to push back, to lift a finger, to get anything done?

"It's never been this bad before," Dee says, accessing the great dish pile-up of 2009.

Home from New Orleans, I tell her, "You wash the first half, I'll rinse. Then we can switch."

Before we can begin washing, we have to stack the dishes. They cover the counter-tops, the stove, fill up both sections of the sink. How did it get so bad?

I imagine the dishes haunting Dee's dreams. She says they get overwhelming. They pile up. She can't begin to see an end to them, can't begin to address them. There's no way they'll ever get done.

We go at them full-force. She pulls pans out from the sink first, then bowls, then plates. Cups. I stack them into piles, remarking how Mom must have at least a hundred of these plastic cups by now, remembering how I held some of them as a child, Kool-Aid sloshing inside them, jewel-colored, flexing in the sun. The old Tupperware cups, not nearly as large or as flimsy as the cups Mom brings home now, year after year, whenever there's a sale— one six-pack of plastic tumblers for two dollars – at Wal-Mart. Mom gives

in, throws them in the cart, stacks them deep and high in the cupboards, pushing rows of other plastics cups back, trying to make room for the new.

Milk turned into white clots. Ketchup curling up from plates like dried paint. Blue mold as fine as baby hair. Pasta noodles, curved and hardened, easier to flick away than wash off. But what really gets Dee, what sends her running to the bathroom, hand over mouth, is the layer of maggots squirming between two plates. First it is the sight of them, then the smell, then the thought, "How long have they been there?"

We get started. We sing along to Randy Travis, get broken-hearted over classic country lines, *I'm gonna love you forever. Forever and ever, Amen.* Sentimental, we remember Mom singing these songs when we were children, standing at the sink, her lips slow-moving. She would be wearing one of her silk nightgowns, her thick legs emerging from them at the calves, her arms, freckled, holding dishes in one hand, the other hand working a soapy rag in and over them. Seeing her from behind, her body is rectangular, covered in patterns of looping flowers, scarlet and pearl, black and tangerine, florals screen-printed onto yards of imitation silk. Her hair, soft brown, permed into short spirals that never hold, falls around the nape of her neck. Sometimes she moves her weight from one leg to the other, and the crescent of a hip rises and falls beneath the fabric. Towels line the counter tops for the biggest monsters – the black roaster we'd mix spaghetti and sauce in, pots for boiled hotdogs, pans for browning ground beef – while the handles of knives and spoons and spatulas stand up from the dish drainer, like rockets preparing to launch.

Dee stacks wet bowls on top of each other, trapping the water. I unstack them, dry them out with a towel. We bump shoulders. I sigh, tell her, "I hate it when you stacks things together when they're still wet."

"They'll dry eventually," she says, dropping bowl after bowl – like the plastic cups, the bowls too are cheap, vast – into the rinsing side of the sink.

"No they won't," I say.

"They're fine. Just leave them."

I know they won't dry. Sometimes, when I take cups, bowls and plates out of the cupboards, water slips out from between them.

"I hate it," I say, running a towel inside the bowls' bellies, "when you stack them like that."

We've been washing dishes since we were children, always fighting over who had to wash and who had to rinse. An epic battle. We made charts as evidence of whose turn it was for whatever week, or, when we tired of the week system, found it too insurmountable, endless, we clicked over to a system that ran on a day-to-day tracking. Injustices occurred. For example, lasagna night followed by pork chop night. A tower of sauce-covered things made the crumb-dusted pork chop plates and single baking sheet seem like a blessing, and one sister might smirk at the other, knowing it.

In time, from second grade on, we discovered ourselves at the sink. Dee didn't mind the silverware and cups as much as I did, and I didn't mind the bowls and plates as much as she did. We'd split the pans down the middle. Dishes cleansed, we'd run our

wrinkled hands over our t-shirts and head back into the world, leaving the dishes to dry in the drainer a little longer before one of us would have to return to put them back up.

There was a fear in the house over the dishes during our childhood, and deep down, I know this is why Dee can't do them now. I can still see the faux-wood counter-top of the trailer-park kitchen, how it curved like a grin, dividing the kitchen from the living room, the linoleum from the carpet. Plates, cups, silverware, sticking to the counter like plaque on teeth. Unnoticeable at first until, suddenly, there is no counter, only the landscape upon it, stacked, stacked, stacked, waiting to be gone through. Dirty dishes left too many days would send Mom into rages, and we would be the lazy daughters, the useless daughters, the daughters who never did anything around the house. Dishes on the counter filled the house with tension, with blame, with accusations. And Dee has always been like this, the one to walk around her nightmares, to leave the dishes alone because now, at thirty, she still believes what Mom told her, that she is lazy, useless, incapable of doing anything, especially them. And when I come home from college, I find myself spending mornings at the sink, filling the sink with hot water and bubbles, convinced on proving to Mom that I'm not the claim she laid upon me, every washed cup a reminder to the world that I am not worthless, while for Dee, every unwashed cup a reminder that she is.

In fifth grade, I cut two fingers to the bone while opening a can of dog food. The can, just opened, its tin roof raised like a halo, fell through my fingers and sent blood spurting out with every heart-beat. Mom took me to the hospital in my pajamas, a towel wrapped around my hand. I called the doctor a liar when he told me the shots in my finger

wouldn't hurt, and I screamed when he hooked me with the threaded needles, watching it go in every time even as Mom set next to me, telling me not to look. That night was dreadful, but when the doctor told me that I wouldn't be able to wet my fingers for weeks, that I wouldn't be able to wash dishes (I'd asked, just to make sure), then a bright pure joy spread through out me. Two, three weeks without washing dishes. Perhaps the stitches had been worth it, perhaps the cuts were truly a small price to pay for such a delivery as that.

Because in our house, dishes were never rinsed. Food, sauces, gristles – the remnants of a meal lingered on for days.

And perhaps it was the injustice of it all, Dee's and my understanding that Mom was just as much to blame, that Dad was just as much to blame, and yet, being children, one cannot point a finger back. You absorb the blame like a sponge, and, if you don't find a way to squeeze it out, it will eventually fill you, allowing nothing else in.

Mom's at work while Dee and I spend the morning at the sink, washing, scrubbing and stacking. The white counter breaks through like sunlight, shining at us, and once we get it stripped bare, it is as though the sky has opened up, and we are uncaged birds, finally let loose, finally finding ourselves able to fly.

With the kitchen whistle-clean, Dee and I go into the living room and fan ourselves over furniture, spread our fingers and open our hands to dry, the lifelines in our palms a little deeper then they were before. We wait for Mom to get home, to put her purse on the newly-white counter, to tell us, "The kitchen looks good, ya'll." And this is

all we want to hear. Pleasing Mom, giving her the gift of washed dishes, a clean counter. We did it, we think to ourselves, for you. It seems, wrapping our hands around the handles of forks, knives, cheap plastic bowls and tumblers, with every dish we wash, we are washing it for you.

## Vultures

We go to the water tower to watch the them dance above us.

I bring my camera; Stella brings her dolls. I wear a knitted hat because this is the day after Christmas and there is a chill in the air. Stella would wear her bathing suit if I let her, insisting that she is never cold. She agrees to wear a jacket but won't zip it. Fine, I say. Let's go. She follows me out the door, the two dolls hanging from her fingers by their hair.

There is the dirt road, then the paved road. There is the collapsing house across from the brown VFW. A left turn, and more of the same: field after field after field. Suddenly, the cows, our little friends, appear, poking their heads through a fence to reach hay spread along the ditch on the other side. Behind them, dirt and more cows. Cows lying in mud. Cows on their sides. Cows standing, broad sided, with down-turned heads and flicking tails.

Months ago, my car's rearview mirror fell off. I tossed it in the backseat, meaning to glue it back to the window but never got around to it. Now Stella holds it up to her face while I drive. She sings, watches herself sing. I have to turn my head to see her. She is smiling at herself, smiling at her reflection.

Good, I think.

The water tower is just down the road, next to her school. I hope the birds will be there this morning. All of them. I want to capture them by the hundreds.

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Weeks earlier, we spotted around a hundred of the vultures strung along the water tower. I slowed the car and pulled to the side, thinking at first they were just large crows. Stella had seen them before – the water tower was in front of her school – and told me matter-of-factly as I looked up at them from behind my steering wheel, "They're not crows, Aunt Coo. Those are vultures."

And so they were. Although too high for us to see their features clearly, they had the ambling gait unique to vultures, cartoonish and clumsy. There must have been over a hundred of them, stacked side by side, though a few stood off by themselves, heads tucked, wings jutting up at the shoulders, giving them a stark M shape. A turned head suddenly exposed a black, curved beak in profile against the sun. What we could see was only shadow contrasting fading sunlight. A wing outstretched, the light coming through the feathers. Some of the birds dropped off and swooped out, perhaps wary of our car, but the whole of them remained, like some thick, black mist curling around this water tower, not yet ready to disperse.

Stella is out of the car and across the road.

I pull down my hat, adjust my sunglasses, and remove my camera from its case. I press a small button on its top; the camera dings, its flash rises and its lens opens. I loop its cord around my wrist and get out of the car and look up at the birds. Far less of them today. Perhaps twenty. One stretches out its wings, tucks them back in, and hops up to a rung closer towards the tower's belly.

A few vultures jump into the air, fly off, and begin circling. I aim my camera. Zoom in. Through my camera's lens, I can make out their gray, featherless faces. I snap pictures.

Marvelous.

Stella stands and walks to the top of the hill. She tosses her dolls to the hill's bottom, lies down, and lifts her arms above her head and rolls down the hill. I turn my camera toward her. Catch her in mid-flight, turning circles over the ground. She comes to a stop at the hill's bottom, sits up and laughs. The vultures, themselves having no voice boxes, can only hiss and grunt, even when they are happy.

The sky is mute as the early light explodes through it. The vultures circle farther out, dancing in the distant sky. Soon, they have all left us. The water tower is empty. My ears are cold. There is grass on Stella's pink face. As we walk back to my car, song birds, tucked invisibly into trees, sing as the morning breaks around us.

## Feral

Inside the tin-sided building, their soft meows rise and burst like Lilliputian fireworks. Gray ones mostly, round-bellied, skinny-tailed, blue-eyed crying machines, these kittens, lying in the hay bales, lying beneath the dead lawnmower, lying on the dirt floor, atop old dust-covered tables, in the slant of sun spitting through the door held onto the building by a hooked nylon cord. One kitten stretches out, its body bending like a backward C. The mamma cat lies on her side, all nipples. Since she arrived, there have been three litters. It hasn't been much over a year.

Sometimes they follow the mother halfway up the yard before freezing in the grass at the sight of our house, as though suddenly sighting a ghost. They turn back. Used to humans by now, Mamma cat keeps trotting, licking up the left-out cat food on the porch and then rolling out for a nap. Later, she runs back to the barn, the flab on her belly swinging, and lets a handful of kittens wilt her belly dry.

From the back porch, from his little red tool shed set center-yard, from the kitchen window, Dad catches sight of them dashing through the grass. A running tally lights up in his brain. He starts to figuring how many. A dozen? Two dozen?

He goes out to the porch, stares out at the tin-barn set at the back of the yard, next to a cow-pasture's fence line, and imagines he'll have to do something about them before their numbers get too out of hand. Home most days since his accident two years back, he spends partial afternoons out on the porch swing, rocking, staring out at the dirt road and

the horses across it. He sits down on the porch swing now, and he rocks. The mama cat surfaces, and is suddenly at his legs, rubbing.

Scat, he says, gently kicking out his leg. She takes a few steps out, then comes back to him. Gravel-gray, she's nothing special. He reaches down to pet her. Looks out at the barn where her little miniatures roam. Sighs.

If he walks slowly through the grass, they won't hear him coming. The tin-wire cage glides soundlessly through the air, suspended from his hand.

Feral cats will swarm a building if left alone, inhabit its corners like termites. In the old days, people tied litters into canvas bags and threw them in creeks, left out rat poisoning, took aim with shot guns or hammers. Dad opens a can of wet cat food and puts it in the cage's back, puts the cage in the barn, then walks back out. Most kittens walk in, squeezing over each other to get at the scent of meat, and when Mama Cat strides up to Dad, rubbing his leg and purring, it is almost easy to place her in the cage with the others, almost easy to latch the door, lift them all at once, and place them in his car's backseat. Pound-bound, he rolls his window down to let the wind blow in, hoping it might drown out the chorus of their small cries.

## Pile Up

Here, things pile up. The laundry, for one. The laundry and ladybugs, ladybugs trapped inside window panes, over-turned, no longer shining. Kittens dropped off by the mailbox. Horse shit. Leaves and old lumber. Torn-out pages of crosswords. Tea bags. Barbies left behind a couch. Cigarette butts fill up a coffee can outside, surrounded by rain-rotted magazines covered in ash. Suds in the bathtub. Dishes in the sink. Bill after bill after bill. Red blinks heavy on the answering machine. Dee sleeps, turns, follows one dream straight into another. The trash can spills over. Dad takes out a bag, comes back inside, and sits on his recliner. He turns on the television. Begins flipping. Another afternoon and another television show, followed by another and another, everything piling up.

## Always on Repeat

We ride out to Wal-Mart, windows down, black night air filling the hollow of the van, catching Alice in Chains as it moves through my window and back out Dee's. It is always the same c.d. The same songs. The same comment from her: "Did you know, when Layne Staley overdosed, that they didn't find his body for like seven or eight days?"

We ride down I-77, streaming in Mom's van, Dee and I smoking, tilting our cigarettes out the windows, Dee singing behind the wheel. And not just singing the song, but living the song. She twists and winds her arms into a slow-forming cloud around the steering wheel, looks at me, points, and croons out lines about drugs, death, the need and want for both.

"Sing with me, Coo," she says, and swings her arm at me like her hand might be a microphone. "Get into it."

I never can.

## Across the Way

Mom heard from the vet that the neighbors across the road with the hound dogs didn't vaccinate any of them, ever, and that that's what caused the stray dog's parvo, coming on hard a week after he showed up on our doorstep, tail wagging with such force that the whole family right away fell straight in love with the droopy-eyed mutt, bought him a chew toy and a couple bones, poured dog food out in pan for him and allowed him, once, inside the house, just to see how he would do.

It all moved so fast. Normally stray cats were all we got around here, but this, a dog, a wagging, sweet, dog, a puppy really, with no tags, just a dirt-dusted collar loose enough to fit a few fingers beneath, and arriving so close to Christmas!

Mom speculated him to be seven, eight months old. Dad eyed his paws, said he was going to be big. Dee thought there was definitely boxer in him, and I agreed, added on there could be a hint of pit-bull in there somewhere, maybe, or basset hound. The dog was long-bodied, light brown and white, with those big glancing eyes that make you want to grab its head into your hands and rub, rub, rub.

The dog was doomed from the get-go, but we didn't know. Wouldn't have guessed. Didn't think immediately, "What if it has parvo?" Instead, we thought, "Isn't he so sweet?"

The night before he showed his sickness, I went out to smoke, took a long look at the dog curled up on the old recliner we kept on the porch, and sensed his days were numbered. He'd been lethargic all week, mopy, and we'd noted his laziness, assumed he was depressed, missed his former home, and bought him doggie treats and more bones.

But now there he was, too tired to lift more than his eyebrows at me when I walked in and out of the door, remaining curled in a ball, head on his paws, tail resting heavily against the arm-chair, as though the battery had suddenly run out in him. I went inside, told Dad, "There's something wrong with that dog," and left it at that.

The next night, the dog walked up to the porch from the yard, where he'd been roaming, and stood looking at me while I lit my cigarette. I bent down and rubbed his head. He lowered his face and let out a pool of red vomit, easily, as though he'd been holding it in his mouth the whole time. Then he let out another.

Dad went out and threw water over the vomit and poured bleach. I sat next to the dog on the recliner, petting his head. The next morning, Dad helped the dog get into the back of his truck and took off for the vet's. Parvo confirmed by the afternoon, in its later stages, the dog was put down by that night. That night, I sat out on the porch, watched the bones lying half-chewed in the yard, and listened to the neighbor's hound dogs as they cried from across the way.



## Red Fox

The back of it first, orange-brown, like a vapor coming out of the trees, slides over the gray dirt path, slides in right under the fence, moving past the horse that's grazing, that's not even noticing, that's twitching its tail and breathing hot breath into grass blades, pulling and chewing, endlessly pulling and chewing, sometimes stomping a hoof.

That's a fox, I think, watching it glide right through the field, going diagonal from the woods over there behind the pasture to the woods over there beside the pasture, a red trotting animal, dog-sized, shoulder blades up and down, up and down, neck stretched, trotting, slipping in and out of the frame in ten seconds or less, a blip I barely catch, this red-tailed neighbor, mouth a little parted, tongue pink and rippled, the animal breathing steady, hurrying out into open space, noting the horse standing there, too big to eat, not like the chickens he's just gone to see, the flock of them down the road, some crammed into cages, wings not stretched for weeks, others running wild and flapping, strutting through overgrown grass, across dirt roads, perched atop old farm equipment turned rusted or a fallen tree, head tucked into wing, quietly breathing, not thinking anything at all when jerked back and shook violently, tossed back and forth so fast it thinks for one split second that it could be flying, flying just like those crooked crows that laugh at it from power lines so often do, thinking of flight before the fox snaps its neck and tears into it – flight – before the fox leaves it, feathers and beak and heart, as a pile on the ground, before the fox goes trotting back through the woods, comes upon a clearing, and crosses through it.

## Disaster Plan

Dee calls and tells me that a tornado threw a lawn chair through the neighbor's kitchen window last night. The tornado must have touched down just outside their house, while they were sleeping.

"If I knew it was out there, we would've ran into a ditch," she says.

I imagine Dee, Stella, Mom and Dad running out into a tornado, across the yard, and lying in ditches.

"That's ridiculous," I say. "Run out into a tornado?"

"That's what you're supposed to do," she replies, and I can hear her smoking on the other line, the force of the breath as it leaves her body only a trillionth the force of a tornado.

"You should have gone to the church's basement," I say. "If there were tornado warnings, you guys should have just driven there and waited it out in the basement. That's safer than a ditch."

I think of the white wooden building half a mile down the road, its basement buried into the ground. They could have knelt there, perpendicular to the bodies in the cemetery across the street, tucked in just as safely, waiting for the storm to pass.

In the hallway, I fold my body over my legs and cross my hands over the back of my neck. A girl wearing white tights and a blue dress kneels to my left, and to my right, a pale-haired boy with freckled arms and blue jeans bends over, head against the wall. We are all knees and elbows, kneeling along the concrete hallway, waiting for the alarm's

blare to end. Teachers walk behind us, eyeing our arched backs, the bumps of our spines showing through our thin cotton t-shirts.

I close my eyes, imagine a tornado spinning towards our school, turning this drill into reality. I want the winds to come and the walls to break open. I want to go flying over tree-tops. Because I am six years old, death does not scare me. Death does not even apply to me. What's the point of a disaster plan, I think. I can survive anything.

I have just gotten my license and am driving down the interstate during a heavy rain. Some vehicles fly past in the right lane, throwing up fans of water, while others stay at the speed limit, or just under. I want to slow down to thirty, to pull over, to wait out the torrential rain that floods my windshield immediately after each stroke of the wipers, but I don't. Heart-pounding, I lean over the steering wheel, both hands clutching it, and drive on.

Suddenly, hail begins pinging off the car. The rain picks up, showering water and ice. Cars continue to fly by. The road is water, the air is water. I slow down to a crawl, try to figure out where my flashers are, find them, turn them on, and creep so slowly through the bouncing hail that other cars must drive around me, headlights coming up and then going around, one after another after another, passing me in dim halos of light.

Mom put Dee and me in her bedroom closet and shut the door then went to get Dad. Tornados were ripping away from Hurricane Hugo, left and right, and Dad had gone out on the porch to watch for them. Dee and I sat in the darkness, a flashlight between us, and looked up at the skins of shirts and sweaters, the cuffs of folded pants. I didn't know

how all four of us would fit into the closet, only knew that if all four of us were in the closet, we would be safe. The house might lift away, but the little room would remain so long as we were all inside it.

Sometime later, maybe ten, maybe twenty minutes, Mom came back and opened the closet door. The rain had stopped falling. The winds had calmed. We could come out, she said.

I went out on the porch with Dad. The world was soaked to the bone, nearly glowing green. Dad leaned against the porch railing, looking fresh and new, as if the wind had swept off the last few years of his life, blurred it into wide eyes and a grin of excitement. There is nothing that makes you feel more alive than a good storm, he must have been thinking.

Mom is turning into our driveway. Rain hits the car's windows so hard all she, Dee and I can see are the droplets bursting by the thousands against the glass. All else beyond the car has vanished. There is only the thunder of rain against metal and windshields, the soprano winds sweeping around us.

As the car turns into the driveway, I feel the left side lift up. The car angle to the right. Perhaps I imagined this, but I remember the moment clearly. The car lifting up, then falling, soundlessly, back down. Mom driving up to the porch and us running out into the water, our screams and laughter blurring with the puddles thrown up beneath our feet.

## Bedtime

In the evenings, I go into the room Dee and Stella share and lie on the bed across from Stella's – Dee's bed – and listen to the stories they read. Stella picks one, two, three books from her doll-house book shelf, carries them to Dee, and then lies next to her, head on her pillow, thumb in her mouth, her blue eyes moving all over the pages that Dee reads from. Sometimes Stella reads the words too, the slow sounding-out of syllables, her toes curling and uncurling against Dee's pale legs. Every night, they read. For twenty, thirty, forty minutes sometimes, they read.

One night I find them reading a chapter book – *Bunnacula* – about a vampire bunny who drains the juice from vegetables at night, and I am brought back in time to the school bus my mother used to drive, my knees pushed up against the back of a leather seat, reading through the same book, imagining what I would do if I found a rabbit sucking the juice out of carrots late at night. I remember the sketch drawings on every three of four pages of the book, remember tracing the images with my eyes, falling into the scene with them. Bunnacula, in his cage, his pointed teeth dipping out from his mouth, just barely, as though it were a secret to be shared only with the reader, only with me. The chapters. Coming upon every new one, and the excitement of reading the title, of moving more into the mystery. Even the pattern of words on the page, the feel of the page between my fingers, the sound of the page turning then falling to rest upon the others. Experiencing the book wholly, leaving my dull reality to chase down a renegade vegetarian vampire rabbit.

And this is one of the greatest gifts Dee could give Stella, I think, watching them read together at night. Every night, Stella picks books and reads them with Dee, and new worlds open. It's magic, this business of reading. And this is magic, too: mother and daughter on bed, reading books, the words on the pages lifting, exploding into imagination, as though little fireworks were shooting off all around them.

## Family Portrait

A family stands in a field of grass encircled by barbwire. A green shack with aluminum siding for walls, door-less, is divided by a wooden post that one horse – brown, shaggy – is tied to, hair splaying up around the halter's braided threads.

A make-shift corral holds another horse inside its wire loop, a bit fitted into its chomping mouth. A white and black cat lifts and lowers itself around the horse's feet, "too dumb to move," the mother in the picture says, as though she does not care if the cat gets itself trampled.

The older-by-a-year daughter wonders out loud if the cat is deaf. The mother scoffs, says, "It ain't deaf, it's just stupid."

A little girl dips into the corral under the wire and runs to the cat, grabs it around the stomach and lifts. The cat kicks off, runs a few feet and turns. The girl cries, "It scratched me," and runs to bury her face into her mother's soft side.

The father: white haired. Hair as white as a dandelion. Metal plates lie beneath, like minerals hidden in the ground. Three years earlier, that skull broke in two, leaving a deep groove where the bones have settled into the crack. The family barely notices the scar anymore, focusing instead on the fading memory that seeps out of it like a scarlet silk flag, waving.

"He doesn't know what to do with himself," the mother sometimes tells the youngest daughter. "He gets depressed."

One time the father used a sledgehammer to break up the concrete in the carport, just along one edge, and couldn't really explain later why he did it, when the mother came

home and asked him what he'd done. Mostly, he mows the yard, but some days are longer than others.

He's disabled now.

But in this picture, on this day out in the field enclosed by barbwire, in the wire corral set next to the aluminum-siding horse shed, the father plans on riding this horse that's been bucking as of late, that has just jumped and kicked with his youngest daughter on it, her legs clenching the horse's sides, her hands gripping both the reins and the mane, her saying "Oh, shit," either out loud or in her head, she wouldn't remember. She got off the horse and the family stood around, thinking maybe this new horse wouldn't work out after all.

The youngest daughter slipped off once the horse returned to standing, and the father walked up and took the reins, even though the youngest had said, "Dad, you probably shouldn't get on her. You don't want to fall off and crack your head open." The father shrugged, lifting his shoulders, wrinkling his mouth, his nose crinkling and the thick scar staying just how it was, and laid his body flat against the horse's broad, bare stomach. He pulled himself up the horse's back and threw a leg over, straightened up, and took hold of the reins.

Now the youngest daughter goes to the other two women in the family, all in a crowd, their backs touching the barbwire, and tells the mother, "You shouldn't let him get on that horse. What if he falls off? What if he hits his head?"

The mother replies, "He needs to feel like he can still do things."

The oldest daughter holds her daughter to her stomach, arms dangling over her shoulders, and calls, "Dad be careful." The other daughter says, "Yeah. Please be



careful." Everyone's heart slows into the same slow beat. Don't fall. Don't fall. Don't fall.

The horse backs up, high-stepping its front feet, stops, leans its head down, and its back legs kick up. The father yells, "No!" and brings a hand hard against its neck.

This continues for some time.

And the family's heart-rhythms grow unsteady, pulsing "don't fall" with "stop hitting it" back and forth, back and forth. The cat stands, hurries across the corral, slips under the wire, and prances off across the field.

The father jerks back the reins, pulling the horse's head to one side, eyes flashing, and it takes off running at the wire. The father yanks the head to the other side, hitting its neck again. And again. And again.

This is the first time he has ever hit anything.

There is the father, and this horse, in a field. The father is not a violent man, you should know when you look at this picture. It is not about a man breaking a horse, or about a horse trying to break a man. It is not about the sad little shack barn, or the women standing against the wire, grimacing, waiting for the ride to end. The ride will not end.

Look there.

The father is frozen in the air, his legs gripping the animal, his arm swinging at it. The mane flies up, stops, stays still. The back hooves are off the ground. The sun stretches their shadow over the dirt, past the barbwire, and all the way across the field. You can't see this in the picture, but the shadow stretches farther than you'd ever guess. It stretches out from the field, the dirt road, up through the yard and into the broken

concrete of a carport, and farther on than that, farther on to places you couldn't even imagine it going.

There is this father and this horse, in this field, neither willing to give up, the father hell-bent on holding on, or perhaps, on simply not letting go.

## As Close as We Can Get

People in jeans and hoodies, long-johns and thick flannel coats, snake ahead of us through a path of hay bales. Timber Woods Haunted Trail. Halloween, 2012. Dee and I are waiting for our tractor to arrive. We smoke, arms crossed, happy to have finally made it to this. Fifteen dollars a ticket, can you believe it? It had better be good. Yes. Yes, it better had.

Clowns run the show here. Clowns in the ticket booth. Fat clowns in camouflage, crossing and re-crossing a field, steering tractors. Bearded clowns. Gangly clowns. Clowns spitting tobacco juice.

At line's end, or front by now, a tractor growls up to us. A lanky clown runs across its wagon and leaps into the grass. Orange-haired, white-faced, black circles around his eyes. I think he's nearly cute, imaging the boy underneath all that, thinking all these clowns like presents we could unwrap. We step up on the wagon and take the hay bale on the end, Dee next to me, I on the edge, overlooking pebbles, straw, the single metal step suspended from the wagon's end. The lanky clown glides up the step, slides down the row, and through the feet of passengers. The tractor jerks forward. I grab Dee's knee, saying, "Don't let me fall."

"I won't," she says. "You can hold on to me if you have to."

Halfway down the path, a vehicle emerges from the woods. It is like an ice-cream truck but smaller, blue and purple sirens flashing atop it, its horn blaring. The vehicle races up to the wagon, and through its open door a chainsaw-welding clown jumps out. He runs

after the wagon, grips the rail behind my seat, and pulls himself in. Dee and I grab each other and hold on, me squealing into her chest, saying, "Oh, shit," over and over. We lock on to each other until the clown jumps off and runs back into the woods, waving his chainsaw in the air, laughing that tawny North Carolina laugh. I hold onto Dee's arm, though by now the people on the wagon are laughing. I'm laughing too, and so is Dee. But I hold on to her arm still. Just in case. She is my anchor, she is my weight.

Torches light up the line of people looped through a clearing in the woods. A chainsaw roars up, and a clown is running towards us. I am a chicken. I hide behind Dee. Noting this, the clown walks at me, and I do circles around Dee, him following, my hands touching her shoulders, chest and back, shoulders, chest and back, me squealing into her hoodie. The clown zooms in and blows air through his nostrils against my neck. I scream. Dee laughs.

Satisfied, the clown skips off through the line of people, them all staring at me by now. Nearly in tears, I detach from Dee and look around, the clown's breath hovering like cold fog against my neck.

"Are you okay," she says, smiling. "Was that too much for ya?"

"I'm fine," I say, wiping my eyes. "Just don't let him come near me again."

We walk a trail through the woods; we walk in the dark. Dee and I lean into each other, scanning the ground for crawling women, scanning the trees for roving clowns. We walk through haunted shacks, strobe lights blinking rooms blue. Mangled mannequins. Narrow passages we must get on knees to crawl through, a clown always waiting on the

other side. Coffined bodies rise up to meet us. We take turns walking through doorways. First, Dee. First, me. Ahead, screaming. Laughter. Children crying. We walk side by side, and if the passage turns too narrow, we try to stay as close as we can get.

A black box shack in the center of the woods is the last on the trail. I enter, then Dee.

Lightless inside. Absolutely black. We walk, hands dragging along particle board walls. Sometimes the walls break open and we step through, sightless. Dee's hand on my back, my hand reaching out into space.

A few minutes in, a body, and then another and another, stumble past, a man saying, "How the fuck do we get out," as he pushes right through us. Dee's hand lifts off me. More bodies brush by, frantic, lost long enough.

"Dee," I call, my back against the wall.

"Coo." Her voice spreading toward me like a mist.

My head goes fuzzy. I am only a pounding heart, only ears, only a voice calling out "Dee!"

And then she is next to me, holding my arm, leading me.

I death-grip her jacket and don't let go. And I don't let go. I don't let go after we spot the smudge of moonlight breaking through a crack in the wood, after we've pushed ourselves back out into autumn, after we're down the trail a few yards, leaves rustling, the blessed moon still in the sky. Walking fast down the trail, into the parking lot's clearing, I keep hold of her arm. I don't let go.

## Mermaids

Mermaids lie on their backs at the bottom of the tub. Wide eyed, blue eyed, two of them with hair the color of sliced pomegranate. Aqua tails, scales glittering, slowly curving to the side. I step around them, rinsing shampoo from my hair, watching the suds gather in theirs.

Stella's favorite bath time toys now, she sat in the tub the night before, holding a mermaid in each hand, plunging them in and out of the water, her crossed-legs invisible beneath the surface of bubbles, the knees breaking through, pink. Dee came in and knelt next to the tub and rubbed shampoo into Stella's hair, poured water from a plastic cup over her tilted head, fanned a hand over her eyes. When the washing was over, she gave her five more minutes to play, then came back in and unplugged the tub.

Dee took a towel, opened it, and Stella rose, belly poking out like the center of a daisy. Dee wrapped Stella in the towel, said, "There's my child! I knew she was somewhere beneath all that dirt!" Stella giggled, let Dee rub her down, pull her underwear up her legs and a nightgown down her arms.

Pink as a conch, Stella left the bathroom, smelling of lavender and child, leaving the mermaids stranded on the tub's gritty floor. As the bathwater drained, the bubbles caught the mermaids' hair, and remained there, popping and breaking.

## Honeysuckles

We'd pinch the green tips of the flowers to break their skin, slipping out their spines to drag their sweet nectar over our tongues. Shirt-bottoms filled with plucked flowers, Dee and I would pull them and toss them, pull them and toss them, holding up the heaviest victories, flowers that leaked clear globes of sweetness right from their tips.

Those petals have all blown away now.

I worry over pesticide. We no longer run towards these vines, looking for their darkest yellow clusters. We buy perfume that is labeled "honeysuckle" instead.

What other worlds lack this vine?

There is treasure out there, behind the house, along roadsides, strung along fence posts. I am ashamed that my little niece has never tasted honeysuckle, has never pulled one apart for less than a raindrop of gold.

Honeysuckle grows wild here. Must we go wild to find them?

We'll seek them out, paint ourselves green and yellow, and go walking through the fields at dusk, just as their blooms are closing. Look there, I will say to the little one as we creep up to the vines. Let us pluck and gut. Soon the sun will go down.

Stella, I will tell her, filling her shirt-tail with flowers, one day you will be surprised at how quickly the sun goes down.

## Her and Her Horses

I remember the horse hair on her coats, the small lines falling like snow over flannel cloth, the swipe of mud along her coat-sleeves. I remember her winter gloves, thin, the threads rubbed bare above the knuckles. I remember her pulling rusted wire from tilting fence posts, unfurling new wire from a bolt, placing the silver twine along posts and hammering U nails around them. I remember her bending, lifting a horse's leg and looking up at me, showing me how to clean a hoof. She would trace the hoof's frog – a delicate V-shaped fold in its center – and tell me, "Things will get lodged inside there if you don't take the time to pick them out."



## Return to the Rodeo

Out here, the land opens up like a quilt of grass and crops, hemmed by power-lines that regularly flare up with crows. Side roads amble up to the highway as we pass water towers and barns, barns and silos. Church after church after church. There are the short, wooden fence posts with cows staring out from behind. The sky rolls on and on, just starting to bleed pink. The world smells of wild onions and hay. It's early summer. This is the country. We ride into it, my sister and I, with the rodeo on our minds.

Dee lights a cigarette and passes it to me, then lights one for herself. We watch the landscape silently, looking for any sign of a rodeo, any sign that says "rodeo." It's been two decades since our last. Now, I, at twenty-nine, and Dee, at thirty, have found ourselves nostalgic over the smell of horse shit and leather, have found ourselves longing to hear once more the sharp creak of metal gates swinging open just before hooves pound through. We've turned sentimental for clowns with microphones, clowns in barrels, clowns dancing in dirt. We spent a childhood at these events, sitting next to Mom on metal bleachers, our heads bobbing as both rider and bull twisted through the arena as though one solid form. Once thrown, the cowboy would roll back on his feet, hat in hand if he still had it, and take his bow before heading for the gate. Dee and I would let out our breath, unclench our fingers, and throw our arms up to join Mom in a long, wild cheer.

We come upon a white wooden sign with black letters spelling "Rodeo" and turn right.

There is a field of horse-trailers, trucks and cars to our left. A middle-aged man, trim, wearing tight jeans and a cowboy hat, stands alongside the road and waves a red bandanna towards the field's entrance. We turn into the rutted path and come upon another man who leans into my window and says, "Evening, ladies. That'll be ten each."

We pay the man and pull into a column of cars. Before we step out, Dee pulls the bottle of whiskey we've brought with us and pours it into the white Styrofoam cups we've filled with ice and coke. We re-seal the lids, and Dee slips the whiskey bottle back into her purse. If, after so many years, the rodeo proves to be not as romantic as we, suddenly, have decided it is, we can at least drink, catch a buzz and wait for the memories to fall back over us like kicked-up dust.

Dee and I don't look like old cow hands, certainly. I wear a green skirt, pleated, a black tank top and sandals. Dee wears a flowered dress, her nicest one, and red, shimmery shoes. Criss-crossing the field, girls in tight jeans and t-shirts sidle up to their male counterparts, thoughtless of themselves as they lean into the boys' shoulders.

We walk in the direction they're coming from, and, at the large, wooden arena, go right, ending up behind the scenes, where horse trailers are scattered through the field, with horses tied up to them, bending down for grass. Riders walk past, not looking us in the eye, too amped up for the competition to pay us any mind. It's obvious we don't belong, given how we tip-toe around manure piles while everyone else just plows right through.

"This isn't right," I say.

"I don't think it is," Dee says.

We stand in the muck and look around, retrace our path and fall into the trickle of pedestrians moving the other way around the arena. All kinds have come out. There are babies pushed in strollers by young mothers, middle-aged men in boots standing cross-armed, looking off to the arena as they talk to each other. There are the riders who have come here alone, standing on the crowd's periphery, twisting their hands together in anticipation. There are the church-going ladies in their long, jean skirts and plum lipstick, and the hard-living ladies with their long, ragged hair and gray, sour faces. There are the wiry pre-teen boys running through the crowd and the blushing pre-teen girls touching their hair, staring at the ground. And there are the elderly couples, too, walking side by side, so thin and wrinkled that it looks like their wide leather belts might be all that is holding some of them together.

Most of the bleachers are full by the time we make it around, but I manage to find a spot in the back of one that Dee and I can grab if we're willing to climb for it. People sit all the way to the ends, adjusted and settled, drinks and purses in place, in no mood to be jostled. "It's those seats or no seats," I tell Dee and hand her my drink.

I lift one foot to the edge of the bleachers and pull myself up, digging my knees into the step's metal side then pull, arms quivering, until I have one leg on the step, and then a foot. I stand, turn, and step through three rows of people, touching shoulders as I pass through.

Once at the top, I look down at Dee and tell her to hand me her purse and drink so she can climb up.

Dee looks up at me. "I don't know about this, Coo," she says.

"You can do it," I say.

Dee is a heavier girl, and clumsy. Add to this the humidity, whiskey and the breezy summer dress, and her ascent up the bleachers becomes a focused scramble of desperation and adrenaline, a flurry of curses and grunts. The people who previously tried to ignore me have to acknowledge her as she crawls over them, grabbing shoulders, leaning against bodies, bumping and elbowing, the whole time saying, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," stepping from one row into the next. People take pity, scoot over, give her room. Some smile, tell her, "Careful," or, "You got it," while others stare straight ahead, pretending not to notice. By the time Dee makes it to the top, she is breathless and sweaty.

"Give me my drink," she huffs. "And a cigarette."

I dig through Dee's purse, come up with the cigarettes, and pull the bottle of whiskey out of her purse, peel open the plastic lids from our cups, and pour more liquor in.

"Rodeos are so much better now that we're old enough to drink," Dee says, still catching her breath.

"God, aren't they?" I say.

A woman sitting in front of us, whose husband Dee accidentally kneed in the side earlier, turns around, lets a blue stream of cigarette smoke out from her nostrils, and smiles.

The surprise of the night is spotting Dale, Rachel's husband, standing next to the cow pen, one arm on the corral, the other hanging at his side. I know it is him as soon as I see

him, and elbow Dee, pointing and saying, "Isn't that Dale?" Dee raises up in her seat, looks hard his way.

"Looks like him," she says. "He looks exactly the same."

And he does. Still tall, wiry, with the long, handlebar moustache, though a little grayed. He and Rachel have managed to stay married after all this time, though childless. I once asked Mom why Rachel never had any children, and Mom replied, "Some women can have children, and some can't."

Dale comes on in the calf-roping segment. The calf comes trotting out of the gate, glancing at the crowd. Seconds later, Dale comes out on his horse, all business, twirling his lasso just a moment before catching both the calf's front legs up from beneath in one smooth sling. The other roper – a teenager – comes out right behind Dale, throwing his rope at the calf's back legs and missing, his rope falling limp on the ground as the calf, front feet tied, flies forward, spins in the dirt, and then lies kicking its back feet until Dale dismounts, kneels next to the animal, and frees it.

The riders run circles around the ring, shirts starched, tassels swinging. The standers in the crowd press up against the corral, wrapping their fingers around the wooden planks, their boot-tips pressed into the oval of red dirt, right where the grass clicks off. The adults look forward, chins tipped up, while the teenagers hunch low, whispering. In the stands, people drink soda, watching, leaning over and talking or else shouting across bodies, asking if there are anymore nachos, anymore money, anymore riders coming on. Dee and I sip whiskey and smoke. From here, we can see the long, curved roofs of horse trailers in the distance, the silhouettes of riders passing in and out of truck headlights.

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The bulls come on last, leaping out from the gate and falling into a rhythm of bucking. Their hind legs, short and squat, kick back while the front legs push off the earth, muscles twitching. Slobber flies out in strings. The riders twirl around the arena, one arm up and the other tied down, jerking back and forth on their saddles. None of the them last very long. Instead, they are jolted off, one by one, until that night's clown must flick the cigarette he is smoking off to the side and climb back into the arena, turn on his microphone, and thank us once again for coming out.

A man hollers at me and Dee as we are walking back to our car, "Ya'll real cowgirls, ain't ya?"

"Yeah," we say timidly, offering little laughs. The guy lets out a whoop, says, "Sure, ya'll are," and disappears into the line of headlights curving through the field.

The heat and humidity have sobered us up, zapped any buzz we may have caught. We get back to our car and climb in, roll down the windows and light two cigarettes. Dee mentions her disappointment with the bull riders, that the rides only lasted a few seconds each. I nod, say that the bulls seemed smaller, too. Less kick in them than when we were little.

The field is lit with brake lights. Cowboys and cowgirls wind around us at fast clips, faces aglow, chins up. We make it through the trail of cars to the end of the field, turn out on the road, and begin heading home. We pass the arena, still lit up, though it fades quickly behind us as we keep moving, fields and fences still surrounding us, always surrounding us, just beyond the scope of our headlights.

## VITA

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