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PURELY SCIENTIFIC TERMS

by

Breanne Nicole Hager

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

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Abstract

Purely Scientific Terms is a collection of personal and memoir essays that explore themes of identity, place, and important relationships.

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Sound Identity

The sky is dark, a sudden onset, clouds a mess, heavy with rain. My dad is probably with my brothers, one of them at least, watching his baseball game. My mother is picking up food from the concession stand, where I sit on a wood picnic table under the metal roof, my legs swinging, too short to reach the seat below. Within seconds, rain is pounding the roof in roaring claps as mothers and fathers begin calling for their children to come back to them.

Daniel where are you? Josh get back here. Emily? Emily?

I recall looking for someone in this moment. Or maybe something. Head turning and turning, watching people take flight to the safety of their cars. Parents holding small children, others, too big to be safely held, running just behind. Rain already starting to gush from the gutters around the concession stand in heavy streams. The water too fast to sink into the earth. Everything is grey and it's becoming impossible to see even small distances as the rain becomes a veil. The cars in the parking lot have all but disappeared in the sudden storm. In this moment I feel safe under the awning, and not just because I remain dry. A single moment replaced with another as rain pours itself out of the sky in continuous sheets cancelling the rest of the day's baseball games. I watch. And I wait. For what I am not sure.

#

The sun heats the ground causing water molecules to evaporate. This is the start of the chain reaction, wherein warm water vapor ascends until it meets the cool sky and condenses to form the cumulus clouds children often draw in landscapes. As the water continues its upwards trajectory, clouds rise and ice crystals form and accrete in symbiosis with the nebulosity until, heavy with water, the cloud turns dark and dismal.

At some point, the cloud will reach a critical mass and water will eventually fall in the form of rain, or snow, or hail, and on occasion cats and dogs though I have never seen this. In some cases, however, the clouds will continue to rise despite its heavy load and reach the base of the stratosphere. This is where thunderstorms form.

#

I did not cry when I left Tampa, not really, at least not at first. Not when I loaded up my car and my mom's truck with all the little pieces I thought represented me—my black leather jacket that's not leather at all, a collection of dresses I probably won't have time to wear, a mess of knitting projects half-finished and ones never started. I did not cry when my father hugged me either a second too short or too long, and I felt the finality to my move in that single moment.

Some tears did fall about an hour into my drive, me alone in the car, which I blame on the gray wispy clouds situated in the northern sky. And perhaps some hormones. The whole drive, however, I did not get sad about my move from Tampa to Memphis. The whole drive, my eyes were affixed to some end dream having little to do with either place.

#

My desk is already messy after moving into my apartment only days ago. This is not an in-the-process-of-unpacking messy. It's a this-who-I am-as-a-person messy. The whole room is messy. All the stuff loaded into two vehicles back in Tampa, unpacked but no longer in their designated places. All the objects scattered about, what I will call my apartment, though it is only a room, and one that doesn't feel quite mine yet, do not add up to me. Cannot explain who I am any more than I can anymore. Still I have brought each one of these items—a desk organizer that's clearly not working, two watches whose times I cannot bring myself to change, books I do not need and will not read but shows signs of a former life that will always be a part of me. And

now they sit in my new room 800 miles from Tampa, with me, and that somehow feels important.

The watches are what I return to in my attempts to organize the mess. Time feels important after I notice myself going to bed an hour earlier and waking up an hour earlier. It takes me too long to realize my body is adjusting to Central time after spending twenty-odd years in Eastern. A cheap blue Timex sits on my messy desk telling me it is 11:34am. Except it is not. This is Tampa time and I am now in Memphis. The other watch, my favorite—a rose gold Fossil I refuse to wear for fear of damaging it—reads 8:37. I cannot for the life of me explain the three-hour time difference between the two watches. All I know is for the Fossil, the time would be wrong in Tampa too, and I wonder if this is a sign.

#

“Hey! You wanna go grab something to eat?”

The question catches me off guard as I load my notebook into the blue tote I got at the university’s graduate student orientation a few weeks ago. I look up to see a classmate fiddling with her own messenger bag. She is in all of my classes, which makes me drawn to her, just being a familiar face. She is also relatively new like me, coming in only a semester earlier. My brain scatters in nerves at the thought of social interactions outside of the safety of the classroom.

“Sure,” I say. Not quite with a smile but still with a sense of confidence.

I am surprised as soon as the words leave my mouth, their naturalness, their immediacy. The person who says *sure* is not me. Just as the person who volunteered to be bookstore liaison for the class we are in the week before is not me. I do not put myself out there. I do not revel in new situations. I do not take such risks as to be vulnerable.

“How about Tracks?” she asks. “It’s close.”

I agree if for no other reason than I do not have the faculties to suggest something else. I still get lost going to Kroger, which is on the same street as my apartment and I've yet to explore the city beyond staple places like Target. We walk to the bar near campus and I ready myself for small talk. *Classes are great. I'm liking Memphis so far. No, I haven't had much time to explore.*

"What's your story?" she asks as I prepare answers to questions she hasn't asked. "How did you end up in Memphis?"

I want to have a better answer than "I don't know," and the story of me applying to the various schools and settling on the one program that accepted me is not the reply she is looking for.

The answer on some level requires me to acknowledge that I am a person who takes risks, an 800-miles risk to a place Forbes magazine called the fourth most dangerous city in America.

"I don't know," I say as the woman holds the door open for me and we enter the bar. It is an honest answer I can perhaps explain if I ever figure it out.

#

As of late, I find myself contemplating ideas of home and identity only to realize I am in a strange state of oblivion and uncertainty. I am not who I thought I would be, but I am still very much myself; I am not home, but I very well could be.

#

The other day, now having lived in Memphis upwards of two months, I was walking on campus and heard a passing plane overhead. When I looked up, the sound and vision were out of sync like some poorly dubbed Kung-Fu film. There was a beauty in this moment, however, I never

realized—the odd sensation of dual, equally valid perceptions. The plane was at Point B and its sound at Point A straining in vain to catch up to its source.

Of course, one can explain the phenomenon in purely scientific terms and be factually correct. Light travels faster than sound, which is why sound seems to be chasing a moving object; however, equally valid is the inquietude of two valid accounts of the same story.

#

The Heart: a notion of home—standard and clichéd, but true. We are most ourselves where we feel loved. The heart should never prevent us from searching for new versions of ourselves though, or worse keep us in a static limbo tied to a geographical location instead of what that location represents. The home as heart should serve as a place where we can return when we need it.

The Brain: the grand regulator of the body, the organ responsible for sense and sense of self. It is what lets us know when we are not home when aberrations arise in what were once natural patterns, which are still technically natural patterns even though they are now plagued with aberrations. Time zones do not matter. Sleep is just sleep, not a harbinger of some secret you have yet to uncover.

The Feet: the place where you walk with no socks or shoes. Dirt exists but it is yours, which somehow makes it less dirty. Thoughts of finding some footwear just to walk to the bathroom do not haunt you at 3 am when the brain has not turned off and sleep has not come easy. What is around you, is yours and is home, and if you wanted you could name every stain and speck of dirt when sleep still does not come at four.

The Keys: the zip code to which all your shopping rewards cards dangling from a metal ring now belong, and perhaps maybe you too.

#

I am attempting to reconcile all the versions of myself I have known to be true. I am my father's daughter—hardworking, stoic, loving, and concerned. I am my mother's daughter—short-tempered, funny, aloof, and direct. I am my own person—independent, creative, driven, and introverted. These are all traits I can make sense of. These are traits that I've accepted about myself for years.

But this Memphis person keeps arising. One who has lunch with a quasi-stranger when Tampa would have said “No.” One who mingles at social events when Tampa would have stayed home. One who finds meaning in feet when Tampa only worked in shoes.

I don't know this Memphis person. I'm afraid Tampa will come swooping in.

I question what is the plane, and who is the sound.

#

Lightning has struck close enough my childhood home to cause some degree of damage, twice. The first strike happened perhaps seven or so years before moving. The lightning shorted a computer, blew the cover for the sprinkler timer off the wall in the garage, and left a scorch mark on the tree closest to the house, presumably where the bolt hit, knocking a border stone from its perch around the tree. The second strike happened shortly before I moved.

The fulmination felt as if it occurred *within* the house. I was on the computer ignoring the storm as I tend to do, when I saw flickers of light in my left peripheral, accompanied with a loud boom/crack. I did as any sensible Floridian does and ignored it. But then it happened again. Flickers in my left peripheral and another *boom/crack!* All within the house. The breaker for one room tripped; the computer within the dishwasher malfunctioned; the desktop I then tried to shut down shocked me...twice; the Blu-ray player in the backroom also crapped out; and an old

television in the front room—a DVD/VHS combo—died, leaving all the old Disney VHS tapes defunct. But the storm only lasted about twenty minutes so there's that.

Florida storms are so natural to me, I did not realize the rain could mean something different in other places, clouds passing as quickly as they formed.

#

I am asleep in Memphis when a crack of lightning outside my windows awakens me. The thunder follows after with little to no lag. This is not natural. I once slept through my home security alarm going off and cops arriving at my family's door. As a child I slept through a video of a shuttle launch at the Kennedy Space Center. I always slept through Florida storms.

I flip onto my side to stare at the closed blinds. Smaller bolts shoot down with thunder rolling in seconds after. These are further away than the strike that woke me but still close enough to cause some concern. Since I am already awake, I flip to my other side to find my glasses on my end table. This storm feels different. Not really a Memphis storm and not quite a Florida one. It's only a few seconds I stand with my fingers spreading slats staring at the rain, but it's calming—the hard patter of wet on my windowsill and the concrete courtyard below. Lightning burning the dark sky.

When I climb back into bed a few minutes later, flashes of electricity light my closed eyes and I drift back off into slumber.

#

Thunderstorms happen for two reasons. The first is most simply the water cycle which forms any cloud. The second reason only occurs when the clouds rise high enough in the Earth's sky. The nebula at the edge of the stratosphere—the middle layer of the Earth's atmosphere—will spread out like an anvil, creating the ominous, vexing shape of a thunderhead. The warm water within

the cloud will rise, too, until reaching an apex, the water once liquid turned gas, turned liquid again, will turn to ice. The same molecule of water, which started as something completely different than what it is now, in a completely different place than where it is now, in its heavier denser solid form will start to fall. Along the way, however, it smashes into liquid molecules creating energy via friction. This energy is stored in clouds until it releases in the form of lightning—a bolt of energy measured at 50,000 degrees Fahrenheit. This is five times hotter than the surface of the sun.

One can actually measure the distance of lightning based on its corresponding thunder. To do so, a person has to count the number of seconds in between seeing the lightning and hearing the thunder, then divide this number by five to get the approximation of distance in miles. A person is able to do this because while the lightning and thunder happen simultaneously, light travels faster than sound so that we experience the same event in two different moments.

#

I have a vague yet oddly vivid memory of driving down one of Tampa's last rural roads at the time dotted with the most fragrant orange groves. I know the road well. I am driving south, but in a few miles with the bend of the road, it will be west. The sky is so dark it appears starless even with the lights of suburbs miles away. Then I see it. Silent flashes of light in clouds I did not even know were there. Heat lightning. A misnomer.

No sound reaches me here. The thunder unable to catch up to its now long-gone source. The moment could very well be a dream, but I know it happened in the same way I know that somewhere out there, someone heard what I could not.

#

The rain is heavy in Tampa. I am ten or eleven as I stand in the garage after getting back from some family outing. My mother holds the door into the house making sure the dogs don't escape as I stare at the rain waiting for the last person to enter the garage. The thunder is so loud, the kind you feel in your chest. My mother tells me to back away from the door, that it is dangerous. But I want to count the seconds between strikes and thunder. A bolt comes down, a dart of silver against the gray. *One, one thousand, two one thousand...*

“Breanne, I told you to get away from there,” my mother reminds me.

But I keep counting until the thunder rattles the garage.

“Breanne Nicole” my mother warns again.

I turn away from the open garage to my mother who's still standing in the doorway to go into the house. “It's fine” I tell her. “It's not that close. It only feels that way.”

Natural Magnets

I am six as I stand in the tiny cafeteria of my daycare. My mother has just lost her job at the downtown insurance office. She makes her final goodbyes to a woman I know as Mimi—she cooks the meals at the daycare—and another one named Kris. Even at six I know this will be the last time I will be in this place. With my mom no longer working and Suncoast Academy—my now former daycare—located on the south side of town, I now have to make new friends, friends from the neighborhood.

My middle brother, Matt, comes home one day and says he knows someone who has a sister my age. Someone makes plans and on a summer day Matt walks me down the nine houses where I meet Maggie. Her yard has no grass and the dirt that's present is more akin to gray sand. Only a single oak grows at its center bringing life to the place. A few hedges sit in a raised garden bed along the front of the house that juts into the yard with the oak, but these are dark and blend in with the brown house. I am not sure what I am feeling only perhaps that it would be nice to have a new friend.

Someone pushes the doorbell that looks like a light. Someone answers the door. Someone makes introductions. Someone is the first to say hi. Who, in hindsight, won't matter. Maggie looks the opposite of me with pale skin and brown, bushy hairy, me summer tanned with fine dirty blonde locks that hang loose and straight about my shoulders. Both of us are shy in the way serious children are though. She asks, "You wanna play Barbies?" I respond *that's cool*.

She will be the first person to ever stay the night at my house. She will be there with my first brush with death. She will grow to be a sister. But I do not know this at six. All I know, is with a person from the neighborhood, I have someone outside my brothers to entertain me. All I remember is the summer heat. Her brown house. Her four words.

#

The first-time Maggie stays the night at my house, my large yellow lab—Shadow—gets up on his hind legs and pins her to my family’s washing machine. I stand helpless as he barges into the utility room, an excited puppy looking for a new friend, me too small to stop him. Maggie tries to shield herself into a ball as we both wait for the friendly impact. My father emerges around the corner of the utility room door to abate our excited screams. He links his fingers into Shadow’s collar and leads him into the family room keeping him there with small offers of popcorn. Maggie and I giggle and bound off for the sanctuary of my room upstairs where we play *Mickey Mouse’s Castle of Illusion* and *Jungle Book* on my Sega Genesis for hours.

Maggie recounts the story to a group of friends in high school years later after friends were at my house and referred to the hundred-pound lab as a “friendly beast.” She remembers my father’s exact words as he led the dog away: *He’s just saying hello*. We will both smile at this remembered moment, a happy dog, new friends, for years.

#

Geomagnetic reversal is a phenomenon where Earth’s magnetic poles switch, a process which makes magnetic north become magnetic south. The concept was broached in the early in the 1900s but did not gain any popularity and thus remained unproven for decades. It was not until about 1950 scientists became interested in the reverse in polarity of the Earth. Ultimately, the sea floor, a place where rocks are made and remade in cyclical processes, proved pivotal in the actualization of what came to be known as *geomagnetic reversal*.

#

It is the summer between fourth and fifth grade. Summer means almost weekly sleep overs. We pretend to be Indians in my backyard; she the hunter, me the gatherer. We laugh at the terrible

haircut I gave my Shaving Fun Ken doll and make his beard disappear under water. We play rented copies of *Summer Challenge*, an Olympic-esque game for my Sega Genesis; Maggie likes the equestrian because she likes horses, I like high jump despite the fact it takes fast fingers and precision timing. We ride bikes around the neighborhood, swing on my swing set. I talk about boys I like while Maggie listens and says she doesn't have a crush on anyone.

Maggie was present a few months ago when our fourth-grade English teacher Mrs. Brate dropped a tampon into a cup of water to show the group of prepubescent girls how the object was able to absorb so much. I already knew how tampons worked, in part due to furtive experiments with my mother's stash of feminine hygiene products. The cup and tampon will remain a shared moment of coming to young-womanhood, one of the few lessons on emerging sexual health I remember in finer detail. Maggie told me later as adults she thought it was crazy the teacher would show our class *tampons*, stressing the word as if the teacher cussed. I never understood her position. I only ever thought how the tampon looked different in the cup than in my toilet.

But the tampon experiment in the classroom was months ago. Even the sleepovers and Barbies and videogames seem distant in this moment. Summer means more time spent together without the confines of school, which means more opportunity for us to grow annoyed with each other. We're at my house standing in my driveway. Three oaks stretch high above the house, casting shade over the entire front yard and part of the driveway. Plants like bromeliads and spider plants, pothos and ferns, circle the oaks contained in neat, stone borders. The side yard has two sweet gums, whose leaves are always sticky with sap. The grass in both yards is plush rising inches above the surrounding concrete. My dad loves working in the yard, which means everything is always the color it is supposed to be. I don't know if I am allowed to walk in

Maggie's sandy yard, if her father is trying again to grow grass from seeds again, but here, at my house, I feel the rules are clearer.

I don't remember why we are fighting—maybe it's about who gets to choose what we do next, perhaps it is about nothing at all—but I can feel my temper rise inside itching to get out, my face hot with the emotions I'm trying to keep inside. I don't want to be angry, don't want to push her. But I am the reactive one, Maggie cool as ice. Anger is radiating in me now and one hand finds rest on her shoulder and I push my weight against her. She stumbles backwards, not expecting my ten-year-old blow. It's the first time in our four-year friendship that either of us has gotten physical with the other. I want to say I am sorry the moment it happens but want more for her to just forget it and us to move on. When her aquamarine eyes meet my sage ones, I sense the anger itching in her too and know neither is an option.

She lays her own blow, using both hands to push me down and I fall shy of the grass my father has so carefully manicured. Maggie jumps on her bike, feet pedaling, before I can comprehend what's happened. I watch from the driveway as she turns the corner of my block to her house and disappears. A new heat builds in my face as I pick myself up and tears pool in my eyes. She bruises my ego more than my hide, though both parts of me hurt. We don't speak the rest of the summer. I am too prideful to call. Or perhaps I was unsure of how to move forward.

#

In studying geomagnetic reversal, scientists already knew the sea floor was creating new crust at areas of underwater volcanic activity—known as mid-ocean ridges—at a fairly constant rate. Here, liquid rock pushes itself up where it cools on the seafloor to form new oceanic crusts. As new crust forms, old rocks are pushed away from the originating ridge, a process scientists

dubbed sea floor spreading because rocks on either side of the ridge continued to move away from each other. Little mountains recreating themselves, pushing sides away.

#

Throughout all of elementary school, teachers give me poor marks for organization, make special notes about how messy my desk often is. My second-grade teacher suggested I be tested for ADD. My first-grade teacher lamented my missing assignments. It is no surprise when I forget my math book at school the first week of fifth grade. Maggie will have the book, this I know. She makes straight A's every year, even when her pink, Minnie Mouse bedroom is a warzone littered with almost a dozen Barbie casualties. She will have the book, and I will have to swallow my pride to get it if I am to do my homework.

My fingers brush over the numbers etched into my brain as I stand in the kitchen gripping the phone attached to the wall. Even as an adult when I see a keypad—a model phone at Target, a fax machine at Staples, a safe at Sports Authority—my fingers will instinctively go to the collection of seven numbers, her numbers, just to push them, just to test them out. After weeks of not talking, Maggie picks up despite the invention of Caller ID.

“Hey,” I say, “Do you have your math book?” She pauses so I continue, “I forgot mine at school and need to do tonight’s homework.” Still, I hear nothing from her. “Can I borrow it?”

Her tone is friendly if not warm. “Sure. Do you wanna walk down and get it?”

My mom knows the conflict I feel about borrowing the book after our fight weeks ago, knows we haven’t spoken in what feels like forever, knows I won’t go down there alone, or at least not without some prodding, so she walks me down the nine houses, pausing halfway down the street when she sees Maggie is outside on the sidewalk waving farewell to someone else. Another kid from the neighborhood—Ricky—is walking away with his mother. He too must

have needed to borrow a book. I walk up to Maggie quiet and serious. Someone is the first to say hi. Someone is the second to respond. No one apologizes.

She hands me the book, fingers wrapping around its blue cover as it becomes the connecting force post-fight. Her house is still brown, the yard still grassless, gray sand. Still only the single tree and dark hedges. And still, I am unsure if I can traverse the yard.

Maggie acts as if nothing is wrong and I follow as we stand on the sidewalk in front of her house. We probably talk about teachers we have, homework we have left to do, a schedule for when I can get the book back. *Yea, I'll just write the problems down and bring it back* I likely say. *Sure. Just give me a call when you're done* she says back. *Sure. No Problem.*

We don't talk about the fight or how we haven't talked in weeks. I don't remember apologizing. The awkwardness of summer forgotten, we resume almost weekly sleepovers, though Shadow, older now, is less rambunctious than before.

I will tell her about this later, maybe in college, maybe before, the story of the math book, the way old friends recount important stories starting with "Remember when." I tell her how I was afraid to call since we hadn't been talking. How I was surprised she picked up the phone, and more so when she lent me the book. How in my mind it was a magnet not a book.

"It seemed like such a big fight to me. We were both so mad. And it had been so long since we last talked." I said. "I wasn't sure how you felt so I didn't want to walk down."

Nonchalant, she will tell me she doesn't remember us not talking but that she wouldn't have let me borrow the book if we weren't friends.

#

To balance the process in sea floor spreading, the oldest crust at some point reach a subduction zone where it slips beneath denser crust and returns to the layer below the Earth's surface, the

mantel. With heat and pressure, rocks turn back to liquid and await their return to the water via mid-ocean ridges. It was the fact the Earth made itself new every day, so scientists could study reversals.

#

It's summer again, our last before we enter middle school. We are in my room, with its green walls and green blinds, animals pushing wheelbarrows on the fabric wallpaper on the longest wall. We pound fat buttons on my Sega Genesis controller, trying to get past the level with the toy soldiers of the Mickey Mouse game when the door creaks open. My father peeks in only to see our faces in the glow of the TV. Maggie and I both pause, I try to sneak a look at the clock without looking guilty. It's past three am. I know that without looking, since my father is off to work. All he says is good night, almost sing-songy, as he closes the door behind him. Both Maggie and I know we should go to bed, even if neither of us is tired yet.

Toy soldiers disappear in the white vacuum of the TV turning off. We both roll off the padded rail of the waterbed, Maggie claiming the side closest to the wall with the animals. We lay in my large waterbed and sleepiness hits me like a wave. I want to close my eyes and drift in silence, but Maggie is still awake. She rocks back and forth, as she always does, and I rise and fall with the tidal motion of her movements. My responses to her become soft murmurs as I drift off.

#

Middle school brings about change as new elementary schools mingle together. I get swept up in the newness and forget Maggie for longer than I should. First, there is Amber in sixth grade. Then Kelsey in seventh. Lauren is added in eighth. Maggie and I still talk but sometimes it feels like the summer I pushed her, some vast distance between us I can't breach.

Maggie makes new friends too and strikes up a friendship with a girl from our neighborhood. Erin is her name. I can't remember the last time Maggie was at my house or I was at hers. I can't remember that last time I choose to hang with Maggie over the others. Or the last time Maggie chose me over Erin.

We are walking home from the bus stop on an October afternoon. It is close to Halloween, and Erin and Maggie are discussing plans for trick-or-treating. I lag behind them because I am not a part of their conversation. Not a part of them. It bothers me Maggie does not bring me into the conversation, though we are still friends, just not as close as before. It bothers me even more when Erin—a girl who inexplicably has decided she doesn't like me, though we used to be friends—whips around, her red hair flying out and says, "You're not invited." Maggie stays silent, doesn't even look back at me. She pretends as if I wasn't dealt a blow. Maggie does not defend me.

I pass them pretending I don't care I have just been excluded. It shouldn't matter anyway, as I will make my own plans with other friends. I don't need Maggie to invite me, I want her to say what Erin did was mean. I want her to act like a friend.

When I walk around the corner and see Maggie's brown house, my eyes well with tears. As I walk the nine houses back to where I live, my face becomes sticky with emotions I can't hold in, my jaw sore from attempting to stifle any sob louder than the breeze about me.

When I tell Maggie about this later in a casual conversation in college about how Erin just decided in middle school not to like me, she says she doesn't remember this moment.

"You guys were talking. Making plans," I say. "Then out of nowhere, Erin turned around and said I wasn't invited."

"I honestly don't remember that." Maggie says.

I look down at my food not sure what I was hoping for. A tiny part of me, a dark little part I don't like, is not sure if I believe her. Either way, that part of the conversation is over. Done.

#

Magnets can either be permanent or temporary. A temporary magnet is a metal object that produces a magnetic field only when in the presence of a stronger magnet; these are usually objects like a paperclip and are made of soft iron. More common are permanent magnets, which are metal objects that produce their own magnetic field—such the magnets that decorate refrigerators—and are made of hard iron.

Outside of these two classifications, however, are natural magnets—or rocks with magnetic properties. These are the magnets that formed over millennia on the ocean floor, that speak the magnetic history of the Earth. These are the magnets scientists studied that helped prove geomagnetic reversal, as bands in the sea floor suggested magnetic north was not some permanent, affixed position, that sometimes Earth's magnetic pole was at the south.

#

Maggie and I experience a renaissance our first year of high school. We finally have a class together, a first in our almost ten-year friendship, and it's "Intro to Drama." Coincidental forces throughout elementary and middle school often placed us in the same teaching teams, but in different classes—same teacher and classes but at separate times.

The sleepovers ceased long ago, replaced now with day trips to the mall to try on the most ridiculous clothes and same room conversations delivered over Facebook. And so many minor moments, vague, hard to place in timelines: riding bikes to the park, trips to the beach, despite a cold snap in spring break, trips to the zoo, walking dogs around the neighborhood,

passing by the same billboard almost weekly and the passenger saying to the driver, “Hey guess what. You matter to God,” then laughing. Maggie coming over to my house every week to watch *Desperate Housewives*. Later in college to watch *Once Upon a Time*. Hanging out on New Year’s Eve. Hanging out on the Fourth of July. Trips to Busch Gardens. Pages and pages of photos on Facebook documenting our lives.

I don’t know if her dad is still trying to grow any grass in the yard or if I can walk over the gray sand-dirt as we spend most of time out or at my place.

Junior year, at sixteen, I decide to have my party at Chuck E. Cheese’s. Growing up my mom never believed in birthday parties—they were difficult to plan and a waste of money—so my brothers and I never had any. She acquiesces, however, and I choose Chuck E. Cheese’s because turning sixteen doesn’t mean much, except that I can now legally drive without an adult. I invite my favorite people—Maggie of course; Lena who I met freshman year of high school; Steph, another friend from freshman year whom I tried to introduce to Maggie only to find out they already knew each other from Girl Scouts; April who I affectionately refer to as Satan; and Kelsey the friend from middle school. Kelsey flakes out last second with an excuse about a paper and does not attend. I have to call her the day of the party to pry this information from her.

Maggie tells me the story a few weeks later in some conversation about how she didn’t like her coach in high school. That she left the track and field getaway she technically was required to attend to be a member of the team. That when she left the coach asked why she was going. That she said *your friend only turns sixteen once*. How the coach wanted her to stay, and how she didn’t want to. I don’t remember much of that day. Just that it was my first real party. That it had an ice-cream cake composed of ninety-five percent ice-cream and only five percent cake. That the ice cream was chocolate chip cheesecake from Tanya and Matt’s Icecreamiest and

they no longer have that ice-cream flavor. That everybody combined their tickets together at the end to get me extra gifts—a blue glitter lamp and a rubber cockroach I named Frankie. And this feeling. That she was there. That Maggie made the effort to be there when she could have just as well given an excuse. That Maggie was the type of person to be there. That we were friends.

#

In examining rocks, there is no clear pattern for reversals, nor can the duration of a reversal be predicted. Some reversals have lasted only a few million years, while two reversals have lasted over forty million years. One reversal, the Matuyama-Brunhes, lasted no more than 15,000 years.

#

We are in Beall's browsing the racks for deals. It has been a year since we graduated high school. Two years since my sweet sixteen. Maggie and I survived our first year of college together in Tampa, and we are now enjoying our first summer as undergraduates. Neither of us has declared a major, but I will pick journalism because I like writing, and she will choose accounting because it's practical.

The shelves in the store feel unintentionally rustic. Four thick metal ells serve as the frame for most of the shelving with wood slats placed inside on pegs. It is not supposed to look nice. All the selves are hodge-podges of mismatched items, with only the thinnest of themes connecting them—dishware, drinkware, soft tabletop items.

We walk the whole store, even the home sections, though both of us have decided to live at home, apartment and dorm prices being what they are. On one of the unintentionally rustic shelves I find something that says, "Best Friends." I don't remember what it was. Maybe it was a mug, or a wall sign. Maybe it was a magnet. Maybe it was something I thought she'd actually like or perhaps it was tacky. But I hold it up in mock excitement hoping Maggie might laugh. Or

maybe acquiesce. But Maggie doesn't laugh, doesn't return my smile. *I don't throw around that term lightly*, she tells me. I don't know what to do with what she said and what it means. I turn away before she can see the smile disappear from my face. I feel like I did at sixteen when I wasn't sure if Maggie would be at my party, or when I was ten and Maggie didn't invite me trick-or-treating. Maggie makes it hard to be vulnerable when her words are ice.

I keep my mouth shut. I do not want to start a fight. I do not want the soreness in my jaw of stifled tears, but it comes anyway, and I shoot off down another aisle to avoid her gaze. Maggie continues to look at the housewares she has no intention of purchasing while I go find the home for the best friends sign.

#

New evidence suggests the Earth's magnetic pole is weakening, signaling that the Earth is about to enter into a magnetic reversal. Some doomsday theorists claim this will have drastic effects on life on earth as the weakened pole will allow more radiation through Earth's protective barriers. Some go as far as to say this will cause a mass extinction. A 2017 study of ancient pottery showed, however, the strength of Earth's magnetic field has been in flux for the past few centuries, and that a full reversal isn't imminent.

In responses to some of the doomsayers, NASA has reiterated the Earth has experienced reversals for millennia and that reversals do not align with extinction events.

*

It was Matt and I who cleaned up Shadow's blood the previous night. At thirteen, Shadow had a tumor pressing into his skull and brains which pushed coagulated blood through his nose. He had been doing better with medicine from the vet for the past week, so it was a shock to find the mess when I got home that night after hanging out with Maggie at an event on campus. I

watched Shadow's chest rise in labored breaths as my jaw tightened trying to keep my tears from adding to the mess. Still, I cried silent tears as my first attempts to clean left smears of blood on the blue tile floor with my brother and I trying to ignore the dog's suffering.

Then because it was there and I could not keep it in, I posted something on Facebook about Shadow, the dog I have had thirteen years—almost as long as I've known Maggie—in the stages of death, the sense that I am losing my childhood. My mother's first words to me the next morning as I walked down the stairs, when I was still bleary-eyed from sleep and crying were: "We have decided to put down Shadow." They will remain the only words I remember of that day.

My brothers roll Shadow, who is too weak to move, over onto a blanket. It takes both of them to lift him into to bed of the blue truck. My mother tries to reassure me it's fine if I don't go with them, that's probably for the best if I'm not there. This is my first brush with death, real heart-breaking-cry-about-ten-years-later death. "You still need shoes," she soothes as my brothers and father drive away with Shadow. For a moment, I forget about the family friend's wedding we're going to later that day.

Maggie must have called me after seeing my post on Facebook because I find myself with her on the phone in DSW. I wouldn't have called her for fear of crying. She knows Shadow has been sick, that he has cancer. I am looking for brown shoes to match the brown dress I bought the day before with Maggie. I want to go back to yesterday to when we goofed off, trying on ridiculous clothes neither of us would ever wear—bright, spandex dresses; too-tight rompers; formal dresses with knee length puffy hems, dresses that looked like a modern take on the 80s but still mostly tasteless. I want to go back to the evening before when they had a social event on our college campus and I cast my hand in wax; and got a plastic, street-style sign that said "B!"

Blvd.”; and when an acquaintance gave me a compliment and I said *de nada* instead of *gracias* and Maggie corrected me with “Umm. B?”, and I laughed it off with a *my bad*, and she laughed too. I want to go back to before I had to clean up Shadow’s blood from the floor, before I saw him lifted into the family truck to go be put down, before he went away.

Without asking, Maggie drives to DSW where I cannot see anything through grief and tears. I do not find my shoes here, but at Ross located at the other end of the shopping center. Maggie swears the sandals are cute and I can wear them again after a few minutes of browsing. At the very least, they match my dress and are comfortable. I confess, “I couldn’t be there to watch Shadow die.”

Maggie says “I get it. It’s ok.” She doesn’t judge me for not being there then asks, “Do you think you’re ok to drive back?” I nod, close my eyes to keep from crying again and sigh. We walk up to the checkout then out of the store together.

The shoes—fake brown leather with a small gold accent—will lie dormant on my closest floor for almost a full decade, but I can never throw them out. I’m not good at letting go.

#

Maggie stops talking to me out of nowhere our senior year of college. She doesn’t call and limits what I can see on Facebook. I try to talk to Lena, but the subject bores her and I don’t want to place her in the middle. Reaching towards adulthood, I no longer know how to navigate spaces of silence where walls shouldn’t exist. I still don’t know if I can transgress the lawn. Maggie doesn’t let me know.

Spring semester rolls away and I put off graduation. Maybe it’s to get a second major, maybe it’s because I have no clue what to do after graduation. Then summer crashes in and Maggie and I make small repairs. At a friend’s party we both arrive early with no one else

around, and I accidentally park next to her, not realizing she is still in her car. She says, “You know you can talk to me.” I don’t know what to make of her statement. I thought she was the one who stopped talking to me. I don’t say anything about her shutting me out on Facebook. I don’t say that she hurt my feelings. But I realize we don’t actually talk about our issues.

I don’t understand what she means when she says, “You know you can talk to me.” She tells me she stopped talking to me because I didn’t always answer my phone or return my calls, so she stopped trying. This is true on some level. School pulled me away as I tried to finish coursework and stay afloat. But I’ve always been bad at returning calls. And this doesn’t explain her shutting me out on Facebook. That doesn’t feel like a commensurate response. I feel like my lack of communication was accidental while hers was retaliatory.

I want to tell her the sting of seeing her sit in the cafeteria when I walked to my Intro to Geology class, knowing we occupied the same space and little else. How it felt silly I just couldn’t go up and say hi. I want to tell her dumb rock jokes like “Isn’t that gneiss,” and about rocks as magnets, and how the earth changes polarity. Because I think this will help make her understand. I want to ask why she essentially blocked me on Facebook. If she thought that was an appropriate response to me forgetting to call her. I want to tell her how I feel but I realize I don’t trust her with my feelings, and she doesn’t trust me with hers.

But I don’t ask why she blocked me on Facebook. I follow her lead and just move on. Just as we did when we were eight and eighteen. We make small talk and superficial repairs. I want to be open, vulnerable. But Maggie doesn’t reciprocate that vulnerability. Though we’ve been friends forever, we can’t be honest with each other.

I don’t think I apologize. She probably feels she doesn’t have to, either.

But I realize that I'm still mad when Maggie spends my twenty-third birthday in Ireland doing study abroad later that summer. We talked about doing study abroad together. I talked about wanting to go to Ireland. The program was in my major. She balked at the idea when I first mentioned it, "Let's see what other programs are offered," she said, "what other countries have courses." Later, when we weren't talking, she decided to pursue it by herself. And decided on Ireland. On the verge of drowning in a tough spring semester and delayed graduation, it never occurred to me to do the same. I do not blame her, except that I do. A small part of me, a dark part, thinks she chose Ireland to get back at me. And the small repairs made at the party are more like fissures waiting to burst on fault lines.

Lena knows I am upset and tries to make my birthday fun. She gets tickets to a concert, but the band cancels the day of the event due to "exhaustion." Lena takes me to an Italian restaurant instead and pays for my meal.

Maggie posts birthday wishes on Facebook on time for my time zone in the states. And I can't separate the hurt from the appreciation. I do not tell her I should have been in Ireland. That it hurts that she went without me. I do not tell her she makes me feel small.

#

I am driving. Lena and Maggie are in the car. We've gone up to Walmart to pick up something to drink along with cheap fireworks to celebrate. Someone finds a pink Moscato champagne. We also buy poppers—those cheap pellets filled with gun powder that makes a satisfying *bang-pop* when you throw it to the ground.

"Shit," Lena says, "Is it really 11:30?"

I laugh. “No. I never reset my clock from daylight savings.” It is New Year’s Eve and we don’t want to miss the second our lives pass into another year. “We still have another hour before midnight.”

Maggie rocks back and forth to the music from the radio much like she did when she stayed the night when we were small.

Minutes later, we pull lawn chairs into Lena’s driveway when we get back to her house. Starbursts of color fill the sky as Maggie, Lena, and I watch the neighbor’s fireworks. Maybe we talk about graduation that just happened for Maggie and me. She called and left a message on my voicemail as I sat in a chair on the area floor before saying “We did it.” Maybe we make plans for another road trip missing our times in St. Augustine the year before. Perhaps we talk about going to the Renaissance fair later this year. My head turns fizzy from the champagne.

“We’ve done well,” Lena says as she picks up the near empty bottle sometime after midnight.

“You and I did well. Maggie got a headache.”

Maggie fake whimpers and Lena and I laugh.

It is 2012. I’ve spent almost every year since high school ringing in midnight with Maggie. Some years at one of our houses. One year at a bowling alley. Another still at Busch Gardens. This coming summer will mark our eighteenth year. Our friendship is almost a legal adult.

#

Scientists do not know what *causes* geomagnetic reversal. Some say the phenomenon is spontaneous and random. Others say it is caused by “impact events” or traumas caused to the earth, like meteors. Most people probably do not even know or care about the phenomenon.

I would tend to side with such people if not for the fact the fact the world could so ineffably change. And we wouldn't be any wiser.

#

We are in my yard, only a year and a handful of months after New Year's, with another handful of months shy of summer. I am twenty-four, Maggie twenty-five. Maggie has been distant since I accidentally let it slip a few weeks earlier Lena and I were planning on going to Tennessee in June. I understand her hurt. Maggie, Lena and I were all upset when our other friends, Kate and Holly planned a trip to Peru and never invited us. They told us on Facebook and Maggie responded with, "That's exciting. When is this going down?" but told Lena and myself that it was disappointing to not be invited. I was mad she went to Ireland. Her response to me seems disparate compared to her response to Kate and Holly though. Compared to the one I expressed to her about Ireland.

But her distancing herself instead of addressing the issue is old now. After nineteen years, she still cannot trust me with her feelings, and I cannot approach her with mine. She should be able to talk to me. I should be able to talk to her.

She didn't want to stop by my house. My mother flagged her down while Maggie was walking her dog. My mother always has to feed the neighborhood animals, even if the animals have owners who will feed them. Maggie stands in the grass closest to the street. I am on a steppingstone in my front yard that now only holds a single oak. One tree my parents had removed after lightning struck it and they feared it could fall on the house. Though when the tree people cut into its inside, the tree turned out to be perfectly fine. The other died of a slow rot.

Maggie says: "I was thinking of going up to Atlanta this summer." She pauses. "To see my family."

I pause too. Our mutual friend April texted me hours before saying she was going to be in Atlanta. Saying she already told Maggie as much. Saying *wouldn't it be great if we could all meet up since I will be so close to all of you guys.*

It's hard to tell if Maggie is being intentionally vague. If she is being retaliatory for Lena's and my planned trip. If she really is going to go visit family.

I want Maggie to tell me about Atlanta. About April. She knows April would have told me. That the invitation wasn't just for her. But I need it to be on her terms. The truth cannot count if it is not of one's own volition. So, I say nothing of knowing of her talking to April. Of her making plans without me. Again. That April has already told me of Atlanta. I don't say sorry about leaving her out of Tennessee and I will come to regret this. But right now, I am mad and annoyed. And I don't want to hurt Maggie, but I don't want to give her an out either. I say nothing of wanting her to talk to me.

I answer in my best nonchalant voice I can muster, "That's cool. Should be nice to see family." Our conversation carries on another minute or two neither of us actually saying anything. We bid goodbye and Maggie walks the nine houses back to her place and I go inside not looking back.

I go to Atlanta months later. Maggie decides not to go. Says *a bug is going around at work and she doesn't want to get anybody sick.* April is the one to tell me Maggie's reasoning, and the source is another tiny fissure. Am I the one who has stopped talking to her?

The dark part of me I don't like suspects she is not sick herself, and if she is, it is only with pride. Or maybe she knows nothing can bridge the awkwardness between us now, that we don't have a history of actually saying sorry. If my anger is a tool, so is her silence.

After Atlanta, I move on to Tennessee with Lena. We hit Nashville and Lynchburg, Murfreesboro and Manchester. I do as I planned, just as Maggie would have. Just as she did with Ireland. I keep myself from her, just as she has done with me. I am happy in the moment until I return and Maggie cuts off almost all communication with me.

She shows up at my twenty-fifth birthday dinner a month or so later, however. This is a surprise. Maggie did not respond to the Facebook event I created the weeks before. Or the text I sent her the week of the dinner. I told her it was fine if she didn't want to go, that I knew things had been a bit awkward lately and we could maybe talk later. Or the call I make on the day of the dinner. She in fact sent me to voicemail. But she shows up at the dinner, invited but unannounced.

We eat at the restaurant Lena took me to when Maggie was in Ireland. I choose the place because I remember every bite of the chicken parmesan being as crunchy as the first. It played a decent role in my being ok with Maggie not being there for my birthday.

I try to play nice with Maggie. Am nice, when I ask her about what is going on her life like some stranger. I want it to be like before where we just make nice and move on. "How's work?" I ask. "Have you had any luck finding a new car?" "Do you think you'll move out soon?" She provides only one-word responses to my questions: *fine, no, no*. In this moment I have moved past hurt to straight anger. Why did she come if she didn't want to talk to me? Why did she treat Kate's twenty-fifth birthday as an amazing milestone the month before and mine as inconvenience? She got Kate, a music major, a quarter note necklace for turning a quarter of a century. All she's given me is grief.

I think she is trying to save face with our other friends. She doesn't have an excuse to *not* go to the dinner even though she is still upset with me and doesn't want to be there, and she can't

explain her absence as we often show up to friend events as a package deal. She shows up, but she's not really there.

When my dinner arrives, it is different than I remember. It has too much sauce, taking away all the texture that made the original seem so divine. Lena takes a bite and says "Aww, man. That's disappointing."

Though we still only live nine houses down from each other, we take separate cars home. Counting birthdays, I determine I have known Maggie for nineteen years.

#

It has been over a year since the dinner. A year since Maggie has spoken a word to me. I did not tell her when I got into graduate school. When I moved. When I planned to visit for the winter break.

Back in Tampa, I feel Maggie's pull. Or perhaps I don't. Maybe I only want to feel it. To have some math book brings us back.

I worry over what I should say, if I should say anything at all. I settled on a simple impassive text: *Hey Maggie. Merry Christmas. I'm back in Tampa for a little while and think it would be nice if we met up and talked. Let me know what you think.*

She greets me with radio silence.

The Bitch's Dictionary, More or Less Alphabetically Arranged

Agentic

In a 2001 *Journal of Social Issues* article, authors Laurie A. Rudman and Peter Glick discuss the difficulty women experience in leadership positions. The study looked at agentic traits—defined as “individualistic, competitive, independent, hierarchical, self-sufficient, and autonomous”—and communal traits—defined as “communal, cooperative, supportive, kinship-oriented, and connected.” The study found participants deemed women with agentic traits as “less socially skilled and likeable” than male counterparts. The underlying issue the study posits is agentic women violate societal assumptions of “feminine niceness.”

Bitch

I am leaving The Dubliner, a faux-Irish bar in Tampa. They had a bottomless drinks night with a flat fee so Lena—one of my closest friends—and I are borderline drunk on vodka cranberries, rum and cokes, and whatever else our group was having. We are outside the bar standing under a streetlamp where our DD parked. The alcohol has broken down what few walls we share as we talk about guys and dating in a parking lot.

I am loose but not sloppy as I throw about words in frustration. “I couldn’t get a drink from a guy tonight and they were practically free.”

“That’s because you have bitch-face,” Lena says casually.

I don’t know how to respond so I say nothing, look away as if something else has caught my attention while Lena turns to another person in our group to engage in a new conversation.

Crazy

adj.

1. Full of cracks or flaws; damaged, impaired, unsound; liable to break or fall to pieces; frail, 'shaky' (Now usually of ships, buildings, etc.)
2. Of unsound mind; insane, mad, demented, 'cracked'. Often used by way of exaggeration in sense: Distracted or 'mad' with excitement, vehement desire, perplexity, etc., extremely eager, enthusiastic, etc.
3. crazy like (or as) a fox: very cunning or shrewd. *Colloquial*

Used in a sentence: Am I crazy? Sure, I'm crazy.

Exercise

I run my mouth a lot. Does that count?

Female

The first definition for female in the online Oxford English Dictionary is "A person of the sex that can bear offspring; a woman or a girl." The OED lists the term female first as a noun even though plants, animals, and even electronics can be sorted as either male or female, thus making it a descriptive modifier, an adjective. The second entry in the OED is "a woman or girl." Also, occasionally: "a wife or mistress." It takes three definitions to get to "female" as an adjective. To contrast, the definition order for the term "male" goes from adjective to noun. It also makes no mention of being complicit in infidelity as there seems to be no current male counterpart to the term "mistress."

Fun Fact

The word for girl in German (Mädchen) is neither a feminine nor masculine noun, but a neuter noun. Potato (Kartofel), however, is feminine.

Girl

n.

1. A young or relatively young woman
2. A woman of any age
3. A female child. The counterpart of boy
4. A prostitute

Used in a sentence: I want you to marry a nice girl.

Girl, Like a

My roommate is driving down Walnut Grove Road in Memphis while I sit shotgun. We near Shelby Farms when she sees a digital sign advertising a haunted corn maze. I stare out the passenger window trying to keep my crazy to myself. I have known The Roommate maybe two months and the confined space is not ideal for unleashing the pent-up hormonal and situational enmity inside me. I am hungry and tired, and her car smells like crayons.

“A haunted corn maze!” The Roommate says when she catches a digital sign off the side of the road, “My brother and I went to one of those. He screamed like a little girl!”

I pause for a moment willing myself to deliver a calm response in the same manner I did when she told me a month ago she didn’t *need* feminism. I stop staring out my window and turn to her my head cocked slightly to the side.

“You know that is offensive right.” I say, trying to measure my words. “To say someone does something ‘like a girl.’ It’s insulting.”

“Well, I didn’t mean it like *that*,” The Roommate says.

I am sure my eyes narrow and I have to pause again.

Heart of Gold

While I am mostly skeptical of astrology, I also mostly like the fact I am a Leo in Western astrology and a Dragon in the Chinese zodiac. To say I am a Leo-Dragon makes me feel like an

agentic badass. So, when I am at Barnes and Noble leafing through astrology books to kill time, I am delighted when I see a book that examines the blending of the Eastern and Western signs.

I flip to the part about Leo-Dragons and read: “Are they truly so self-centered as to deserve the hyperbolic appellation of ‘egomaniac’? Yes.” And “He or she longs for dominion over others.” The friend I am with asks am I ok when I pause from reading this aloud. I look up to see her concerned face searching mine.

“This is amazing,” I say as my face brightens. I proceed to tell friends new and old, strangers too, that a book called me an egomaniac with a wide set smile and a laugh.

The friend I was with reminds me that the book said, “egomaniac with a *heart of gold*.”

I am not sure why this last part matters.

Human Woman

The last season of *30 Rock*—a show created by Tina Fey that I obsessively watch because I do in fact *need* feminism even if it’s problematic feminism—finds the lead character, Liz Lemon, re-pursuing adoption, a series long pursuit. It becomes apparent adoption will be easier if Lemon marries her boyfriend when she finds her less than stellar ex-boyfriend was able to adopt. However, true to form, Lemon wants to deny the girly parts of herself—as many women do, as do when I accept the “egomaniac” designation while denying the “heart of gold” one—and repeatedly tells everyone around her that her wedding doesn’t need to be special, in fact she plans to go braless.

She resists the idea of having a fancy wedding until a couple of mishaps force her to break down and admit “A tiny little part of me that I hate wants to be a princess.” Her boyfriend tries to reassure her with, “It’s ok to be a human woman” but Lemon responds, “No, it’s not! It’s

the worst, because of society!” While not specially addressed in their study on agentic and communal traits, I think Rudman and Glick might agree.

Hussy

Once a contracted term for a housewife, it didn’t take long though for individuals to use “hussy” as a “playfully rude” way to refer to a woman. Some people didn’t get the joke, however, and “hussy” is now more commonly used to describe an improper woman.

Hysterical

Tough we use “hysterical” pejoratively, *hysteria* was once considered a serious pathology, and though the OED offers no examples for use of the term past the 1800s, the dictionary as of 2019 has not marked the pathological usage of hysteria as a noun obsolete. This can perhaps be attributed to the fact it took the American Psychology Association until 1980 to change “hysterical neurosis” to something with less gendered connotations.

The word hysteria comes from the Greek root “hystera” and it often translated as suffering of the womb. Later uses of hysterical have been used to mean “extremely funny” or “hilarious.” Hysterical, right?

Internalized Misogyny

The OED offers no definition for internalized misogyny—though it does offer one for bitch face—and still, I see internalized misogyny pop up in daily life, while I remain unconcerned about the neutral facial expressions of others.

On a reading quiz I asked my students the difference between liberal and radical feminism. Most had not done the reading and offered liberal feminism as women wanting equal rights to men and radical feminism as women wanting *more* rights than men. Some students even thought that the term “radical feminism” meant diminishing men’s rights. I am not surprised by

the number of female students who offer definitions in this style. My Indian roommate my first year in Memphis, after all, didn't think she needed feminism despite having a mother who thought she should get married as opposed to pursuing education.

Iron Man

Almost a decade after the "bitch face" incident, I am sitting with Lena on a midnight balcony in San Diego, days before April's wedding, both of us now thirty. Her husband attempts to sleep in the hotel room behind us despite our chatter drifting through the glass.

With a Captain and coke in hand I tell her "I've given this a lot of thought. If I had to choose any Marvel superhero I was most like, it would be Iron Man." I ready myself to offer up the support for my argument.

Without hesitation she says, "Oh yes. You are totally Iron Man."

Bitch, revisited

In a 2008 episode of *Saturday Night Live* Tina Fey took a small break from her work on *30 Rock* and joined her old crew at the Weekend Update desk to provide her perspective on the coverage of then presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. Fey went through the list of criticisms leveled at Clinton, including her husband (Bill) and the fact as a woman she will age, before finally getting to complaints about Clinton's personality. On this Fey says "Maybe what bothers me the most is that people say that Hillary is a bitch. Let me say something about that: Yeah, she is. And so am I...Know what? Bitches get stuff done."

Jezebel

In the bible, Jezebel is a queen, married to King Ahab of Israel. She is also a priestess for the goddess Astarte, and herein lies the problem. Jezebel's beliefs are contrary. Not only does she not worship Yahweh, she worships a female deity instead. More problematic, she seems to be

successful in having others follow her religion. Jezebel becomes the target for blame for all the idolatry of Israel at the time and ultimately suffers a violent death—she is thrown from a high window, run over by a chariot, and then eaten by dogs. In modern usage, “jezebel” is used to police female sexuality, in particular black female sexuality, rendering any feminist power of the queen moot. And I have yet to see a term police male sexuality that is not rooted in first policing women—himbo and man-whore—thus proving being a human woman is the worst. Because society.

Like a Girl, revisited

When the roommate says she doesn't “mean it like that” I sense an anger and can't tell if it is rational or not. Is this hormones? Is this hunger? Is this being fed up with internalized misogyny? Is it the crayon smell? Perhaps I'm just being hysterical.

Internally I ask, *then why did you laugh when you said it*. Externally I say, “It is insulting to women to say ‘like a girl’ because it is meant as an insult to your brother. Questioning his manhood.”

“Well no other words exist to describe how it sounds,” she informs me. “The pitch and tonal quality,” she continues, not a note of irony in her voice.

My eyes have rolled to the top of my head as if to see the mental calculations I need to do to not sound crazy or to perhaps sound nice. “What about screamed like a baby?” I ask.

“Isn't that insulting to babies?”

Again, I have to pause as my eyes widen trying to locate the thoughts I can't say out loud.

Linguistic Sexism

Bowman K. Atkins, in “Women's Language or Powerless Language,” defines linguistic sexism as “a wide range of verbal practices, including not only how women are labeled and referred to,

but also how language strategies in mixed sex interaction may serve to silence or depreciate women as interactants.” Calling woman girls is a nice example. Saying they are crazy or a jezebel are too. Suggesting they should be nice or that they have a heart of gold can also be examples.

Mother

I am talking with my mother, about what I can't remember, when I feel the need to exclaim, “I am a nice person.”

Without missing a beat my mom responds, “No you're not!”

I stare at her slightly confused and then laugh.

“It's ok,” my mom adds. “I'm not nice either.”

Nice

The earliest definition of nice was silly, foolish, ignorant. “Absurd” also pops up in early definitions as well as “wantonness” and “lasciviousness.” Nice has also been used to mean “ostentatious” or to be more connotationally flattering, “elegant.” And the definitions keep rolling: scrupulous, fussy, strict, virtuous, cowardly or unmanly, lazy, tender, pampered, rare, shy, intricate, subtle, exact, slender, unimportant, sensitive, dexterous, meticulous. The Oxford English Dictionary says the transformation of the word nice over the years is “unparalleled in Latin or in the Romance languages.” Even modern usage is flexible. To be nice can mean to be agreeable or it can mean finely attuned, as in “He has a nice year for music.”

Maybe my mom is right. Maybe we aren't nice.

Bitch, revisited

I once had someone call me a bitch for pointing out the irony in sending a mass email to complain about mass emails, proving that the person really didn't understand irony. I only

remember this because Facebook reminded me via memories, so I didn't take it too much to my golden heart.

Nice, again

I am in the driveway with Matt, who's been living at home since his job transferred him back to Tampa. This is post-bitch face convo with Lena but pre-Iron Man. Our conversation is unremarkable as we wait for our mother until he says, "You aren't nice."

This catches me off guard. I stumble over my words until I am finally able to counter with "What are you talking about? I'm nice."

He continues, "You aren't a bad person. You're just not nice."

Nuance

Words change. Meanings change. Everything changes. Trace *bitch* back to its origins. The original usage was strictly for classifying female canines. Then some asshole around the 1500s met a woman he didn't like and supplied bitch with new meaning (or perhaps he was just being "playfully rude"), and it came to mean an unpleasant person, more often than not a female person. The negative connotations just snowball from there.

In modern usage we use *bitch* to mean someone who is subservient, or something that is difficult, or a complaint, or *to* complain. You can also ride bitch, if you are the unlucky one forced to sit middle on a long car ride. It is demeaning to guys if someone calls them a bitch, because it suggests something un-masculine, it suggest something female, because even guys know being a human woman is the worst. Because, despite all its nuanced meaning, *bitch* always suggests something female and almost always something negative. A woman who is a "bitch" is breaking with the common rules of masculinity and femininity. She probably isn't being nice.

Overbearing

From a 1999 study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*: “The same qualities that are perceived as ‘masterful’ in men may be perceived as ‘overbearing’ in women. Agentic men may not be perceived as particularly nice, but they do not violate stereotypic prescription that they ought to be sensitive to others' feelings.” Agentic women do, however, violate the socially expected credo of femininized niceness and are at best called “not nice” and at *almost* worst a “bitch.”

Bitch, revisited

In an episode of *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, another Tina Fey vehicle post *30 Rock*, the usually sunny titular character confronted with her abandonment issues snaps and calls her landlord, Lillian, a bitch. Lillian herself is frustrated for society looking at her as a harmless old woman and not the agentic badass she perceives herself to be. Later in the episode Kimmy approaches Lillian to say, “Let me apologize for calling you the b-word. Cause what you really are is a massive c-word: class act.” The joke being the c-word is usually “cunt,” another word used to describe “unpleasant” women.

Oxymoronic

adj

1. Incongruous, self-contradictory

Example: Hussy was once a playfully-rude way to refer to women.

Pejoration

In terms of linguistics, pejoration refers to words developing more negative connotations. Hussy is one example, as well as mistress. In early iterations, “mistress” meant a woman with power. This could be over a child, like a governess, or over an entire house (though even then, this was usually tied to a male counterpart). The female power associated with “mistress” has slowly

slipped away (save for in the BDSM community). Now, it is hard to escape the common definition of a clandestine female lover. Though the OED is a little heteronormative with its entry: “A woman other than his wife with whom a man has a long-lasting sexual relationship.”

Pig (Like a Girl, Revisited)

I take a moment, pause at The Roommate’s response about babies. I am sure my eyes have gone wide. Internally I ask, *what the fuck is wrong with you*. Externally I ask, “How about like a pig? Pigs squeal.”

“Isn’t that still insulting?”

Internally I am baffled. I ask *are you more concerned about a pig than an entire gender*. Externally I am quiet.

She goes on. “Words only have meaning if you give them meaning.”

I remain quiet and go back to staring out the window.

Bitch, revisited

I’m not sure how I feel about Lena saying I have a bitch-face or multiple family members saying I’m not nice. Small parts of me find it amusing and other parts, the parts that lived that moment, are still hurt and baffled. But I know when a person I cannot remember called be a bitch over a passing comment about emails she wasn’t calling me a dog and it was wasn’t meant as a joke, nor was it playfully rude. And while it doesn’t cut me, I know it meant to do so. I know what that person’s intentions were. Words have meanings that are impossible to escape.

Pussy

n.

1. Chiefly colloquial. A girl or woman exhibiting characteristics associated with a cat, esp. sweetness or amiability. Frequently used as a pet name or as a term of endearment for woman's genitals
2. slang (chiefly North American). A sweet or effeminate male; (in later use chiefly) a weakling, a coward, a sissy. Also: a homosexual man
3. The female genitals; the vulva or vagina
4. woman, or women collectively, regarded as a source of sexual intercourse

Used in a sentence: Pussy is a great example of linguistic sexism in that it diminishes a woman to her genitals, diminishes men to the status of women, and diminishes agentic animals—ones that largely domesticated themselves—to the description of sweet and amiable.

Quean

You can be a Queen Consort (the wife of a King), Queen Mother (the mother of a King), or a Queen Regnant (simply a Queen by her own right). Not to be confused with quean—pronounced the same way—“a bold or impudent woman; a hussy.” Jezebel of Israel is an example of how a woman can be both queen and quean, though all this is still problematic.

Runt

In a season 1 episode of *30 Rock*, Liz Lemon struggles with what it means to be both woman and boss when a co-worker calls her a cunt. Of course, while this is a word people feel free to bandy about in frustration, it is not one people can actually say on broadcast television, so they humorously substitute the word with "runt" as cats—or pussies?—play a small role in the episode.

Part of Lemon's issue with the word, aside from the suggestion that she isn't nice, is there is nothing to call a man in return that is just as cutting; there is no male equivalent, nothing that holds the same negative, emotional meaning as the word cunt.

Sassy

Amelioration, linguistically speaking, is the evolution of a word to have more positive connotations. Some offer the word "nice" and its move from foolish to pleasant as an example, but as a human woman I digress.

Bitch, revisited

In season 1, episode 10 of *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, Xan, a character that blames Kimmy for her parents' divorce, walks into the kitchen where Kimmy is making a sandwich and greets Kimmy with "You bitch!" Almost-ever-sunny Kimmy responds with, "A female dog? A thing that makes puppies? Nice compliment Xan."

Thin

adj.

1. of little thickness or depth
2. slender, tenuous, attenuated

Used in a sentence: My patience for the English language has been wearing thin.

Termagant

According to the OED, Termagant was believed by Christians to be a Muslim deity. In rare usage the term refers to a "quarrelsome person" but in more modern usage typically means "A bad-tempered, overbearing woman." Though there is no proof Termagant existed, I like to think of her existing alongside Jezebel, both of them discussing what superhero they might be and the struggles they face being powerful women.

Villainess

Catherine Quicks writes in “Jezebel’s Last Laugh: The Rhetoric of Wicked Women,” a feminist revisioning of the culture figure, “Certain female figures are labelled ‘villainess’ because they embody certain characteristics or perform certain actions which potentially threaten the patriarchal construction of the feminine, and thus the construction of the masculine.” That is, if women can be powerful, what is left for men?

I wish I had a better understanding of everything I thought was wrong with the phrase “like a girl” when my roommate casually used it my first year in Memphis. I knew then she was wrong when she said that words only have meaning if you give them meaning, but I didn’t realize the extent of the words I was fighting.

Bitch, revisited

Lillian shrugs off Kimmy’s apology and like Fey embraces the label of bitch, telling Kimmy she doesn’t need to apologize: “I am a bitch. No matter what anyone thinks, I’m tough as hell.”

Virago

n.

1. A man-like, vigorous, and heroic woman; a female warrior; an amazon
2. A bold, impudent (or wicked) woman; a termagant, a scold

Used in a sentence: Would “virago” fall under amelioration or pejoration?

Wonder Woman

William Mouton Marston was an American psychologist and the creator of *Wonder Woman*. He formed the character because of the “blood-curdling masculinity” of other comics. Approaching Wonder Woman from a psychological perspective, Marston wanted to combine the strength present in male characters (agentic traits) with more stereotypical female qualities such as love

and tenderness (communal traits). As he reasons in “Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics,” “not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, power... Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weak one.”

Though Wonder Woman often ranks as the “best” or “favorite” superhero amongst comic book fans, it’s hard to feel like not much has changed since Wonder Woman’s first appearance in 1941. Women are punished for being strong and punished for being traditionally feminine. It’s simply not ok to be a human woman. But when I don my Wonder Woman apron to make cookies for friends, I sense the necessity of her feminine power even if I still fancy myself an Iron Man.

Yourself

Question: Of the aforementioned words, which would you use to describe yourself?

ZZZ

How do you lay to rest the policing of women via language? How do you fight off meanings that change, for the better and worse, almost daily? How do you exist when others deny those meanings and their implications?

How do you survive in a world where the most common tool for communication can be used so easily used against you?

Am I being crazy? Hysterical? Am I being overbearing?

Should I try being nice?

The Absence of Absence

I was taken with the sea foam when I first saw it. Filled spaces in my camera's memory card as the foam sat full and empty on the beach. I wanted to know why it was there and what it might mean.

#

Muscle memory overtook as my car hit the road. I didn't worry about my towel when I got to the bronze buffalo statues. The temperatures had finally dropped from the hottest December on record to a cool 60, with a breeze that would later penetrate my lacey sweater. It was my first winter back in Tampa since moving for graduate school a few months prior. The only part of me that would touch water would be my feet, more out of force of habit than actual desire. When I reached the lake where the local Greek community held the Epiphany cross dive, I convinced myself we always took the long way around the lake. I veered left at the stop sign instead of right, ending up in a residential area I'd never seen in all of my trips out to Tarpon Springs. Still, the area felt familiar, the cousin of an old friend: a collection of smaller houses in a neighborhood butted up against multistory edifices—two vastly different worlds existing side by side; the world giving way to flatness and the sense the sea was close at hand. No longer afraid of getting lost, I followed the road to its conclusion.

#

I discovered Howard Park maybe ten years before moving for graduate school, when Maggie decided it would be fun to participate in activities vaguely high school. The idea was to spend part of spring break at the beach. Howard Park wasn't like the commercial beaches I was more accustomed to in Florida. Driving the single road that ran through the area, the park turned from playgrounds and picnic pavilions to a nature trail that butted up next to mangroves. At the end of

the road that traversed the whole park was a long driveway that acted as pier. Cars could park and fish off the side of the road as dogs cooled their pads in the water. At the end of all this was the beach. Whenever my friends and I planned to go to “Howard Park,” what we meant was the beach. White sands stinging feet in summer, water lapping at the shore, palms stretching fronds to shade beach goers.

Skeptical of a free beach, I asked when Maggie brought up the idea of going to Howard Park for spring break if it was a *real beach*. “Like with saltwater? It’s not a lake is it?” I asked. She assured me it was the Gulf.

The park was just over twenty miles west of Tampa in Tarpon Springs, anywhere from forty minutes’ to an hour’s drive from where we lived. The town boasted the highest percentage of Greek Americans of any U.S. city, though we rarely took advantage of what that meant, namely Greek food. Though in truth, I mostly liked the area because it felt clandestine and therefore unsullied. To get to the park with the beach, you had to drive through the city’s tiny downtown filled with squat one- or two-story antique shops. Fat, bright lettering on glass marked storefronts. Even though the roads were no longer cobblestone, it was hard to imagine much had changed since the town’s initial founding.

Maggie took me out to the beach the day before our group was to congregate, mostly to check if her directions were fine for the rest of our friends. I don’t know why either of us felt the need to test her directions. She was always hilariously specific. *You will see two random buffalo statues. Pass them and stay on the road. The road will meet up with a larger intersection. Keep driving forward. You will make a right further up the road next to the plaza with the K- Mart. The turn off for the park will be on your left after this.*

The directions about buffalo statues caused a mixture of sighs and eyerolls when our friend group finally met up. The statues were pretty much impossible not to pass and were also probably equidistant from our houses and the park. Maggie liked them because they were strange. For the beach, Maggie also included a comment about a house with a purple roof, that was also impossible not to pass, but was at least closer to the actual beach.

#

Howard Park was lovely the first trip when it was just Maggie and me. The standard Florida fare except without the claustrophobia of dozens upon dozens of people scrambling for prime lounging real estate. Neither of us wore swimsuits, but we both placed our feet at the edge where salt and sand meet, the place where it's impossible to tell which there is more of, a threshold that takes time to make sense of. As we walked the shoreline, I let the gentle waves spill over my feet watching the water recede back to the Gulf. This was always my favorite part of the beach. This is what I remembered.

It wasn't until graduate school and I read Rachel Carson's "The Marginal World" that I understood the love I sensed every time my feet compressed the wet sand, toes sinking, water emerging like a secret. Carson writes about the daily changing shoreline in her essay, the being of two worlds (land and sea), the incredible species that manage to eke out existences in the harsh and mutable world that is the bewildering threshold. The shore is ephemeral, but it is also this boundary brimming with life.

Maggie and I walked the length of the main beach. Conversations now carried out with faulty memory. Her probably saying that the first section of the beach was not really for swimming and the other section was smaller than the one we were walking here. Large rocks segmented the three areas and on a later trip I would sit on these rough stones to watch foam

swirl in eddies in all the empty space between the rocks. Maggie asked if her directions were ok as we made plans for what we might do and what we might eat the next time we were here.

When I close my eyes against this memory, I hear the white noise of waves and the cries of sea gulls that were never there, see the sun hanging over the Gulf, a covenant. The water bringing the reflection to my feet and everything ebbing out with the wave.

#

A writing prompt in my first semester of graduate school—the same semester I found Carson—asked that I write in the style of Judith Kitchen’s “The Circus Train.” This was almost a full year after Maggie stopped talking to me out of nowhere and almost ten years after we first went to Howard Park. The piece I now see as ironic considering how much I lambaste writers for writing in second person when I see it in my editorial duties with the university’s literary journal.

You are at Howard Park when you see sea foam for the first time. Tender clouds dancing on soft waves. Bouncing, refusing to join the depths of the Gulf. The mere sight of the aberration fills you at once with a joy as vast as every molecule of water collected on a bright blue marble. Deep. Fulfilling. Ingenuous delectation. How could it not be this way always? Compelled you take some small detritus in your hand to breathe small breaths as if it were an alabaster flower formed in a field, not sea matter turned solid. You can bury your toes here. Under sand and water and foam. But you cannot hide, from yourself, the company you kept here—the absence from your life. The sand it goes, washed out with the tide, but the foam remains. Tender clouds of sea turned solid.

It was probably the most personal my writing had been in the class up to that point. I was new to creative nonfiction and didn’t know how to tap into that personal well without sounding affected. I was trying to maintain distance. It felt strange to so easily enter this realm of lyric that

Kitchen presents in “The Circus Train,” that I also admired in Carson. I wanted to be smart and wry, Tina Fey-esque. I resisted the idea of pretty, that that part of me existed. But Kitchen’s use of second person created both the closeness and a distance. Writing the “me” as a “you” made it someone else but brought me back all the same. I could slip in and out of identities. And Carson wrote so beautifully of a favored landscape, infusing the images with deeper meaning. The image of an “elfin starfish” hanging from the ceiling of a low hanging cave that could only be seen at low tide still sits with me years after first reading “The Marginal World.” The water reflecting the starfish back to itself as it reached down to touch the water. For a moment there were two starfishes, like the two selves. Or maybe the two friends.

Kitchen could use second person to explore the memory of seeing a colorful train as a child and her cancer diagnosis as an adult, a woman faced with death trying to make sense of all the memories stored up in her body. Carson could look at the world as a complicated metaphor for human life. A deep focus on nature: a filter straining images for personal meaning. Second person: a means to talk about a subject to close at hand, a means to create distance, the need to do so.

Kitchen actually uses second and third person sparingly in “The Circus Train” and primarily writes in first. But when I sat down to emulate her style, it was second person that I remembered. Some other person remembered that moment, just as someone else existed in that moment. I needed her, that distant person, to talk about Howard Park, about what it was and who it isn’t anymore.

#

I can’t quite place the memory of when I first saw the foam, only that I instantly became obsessed. It seemed out of place sitting in the damp sand just within reach of the soft waves. I

was in college now, and in all my years in Florida I can't recall seeing foam before this moment. I must have asked "Is that sea foam?" with someone responding, "Looks like it" and moving on to set up our towels on the beach, while I stood there continuing to watch the tender clouds making home at the edge of the ocean.

It was probably two years after I first went to Howard Park and I was in love with the foam. The way it sloshed around the rocks but didn't break. The way the current would only take it out so far out. The foam seemed delicate yet sturdy. It reminded me of how matter exists in all states with the same molecular composition. Something familiar and different all at once, the cousin of an old friend. It felt like the foam was just a moment from becoming water again.

A number of us ended up taking pictures for posterity, or perhaps just because. This was late 2000s and digital cameras were becoming omnipresent. It was easy to take hundreds of pictures and decide what to keep and what not to; to fill, then empty space.

Looking back at the pictures, the ones I kept, I don't think anyone got in the water that day with the foam. Two friends are in jeans. One of them has a jacket. Another friend has a towel wrapped around herself like a shawl. Everybody seems to be completely dry. No one seems to be wearing a swimsuit.

I actually don't have many pictures of the foam. At least not ones I can readily find. They could be stored elsewhere. An old laptop. An old flash drive. Though I swear I crouched in awkward angles to snap pictures of the foam on the shore. Carefully scaled rocks to preserve the image of the foam in the rock-trapped tides. Waddled out into the Gulf, water above my knees, to capture in different angles of *sea matter turned solid*.

Either my memory is wrong, or these pictures have been lost.

#

Kitchen used the word *saudade*—a Portuguese word with no real English equivalent—to describe her ruminations in “The Circus Train.” Though this word is only introduced towards the end of the essay, the thread is apparent throughout to where this is what I remember of “The Circus Train”: the word *saudade*. The term suggests nostalgia and mourning, but not necessarily something sorrowful. Wikipedia writes “Saudade was once described as ‘the love that remains’ after someone is gone.” Kitchen’s brief definition suggests the mix of “nostalgia” and “pleasure.” Better yet is Portuguese writer Manuel de Melo’s definition, “a pleasure you suffer, an ailment you enjoy.” The point where languishing meets rapture. A liminal space.

Our class discussion of Kitchen brought forth the question of how similar or dissimilar Kitchen was to Samuel Beckett as both returned to some inescapable memory, a haunting memory, a moment where something is irretrievably lost. Kitchen had her train that she questions ever existed as child and an estranged lover’s hand reaching for hers over some table. Beckett had a moment when his mother turned away and would not hold his hand. Once I reached my hand out to Maggie and she just turned away to talk with someone else. But this is not the same, just a coincidental connection.

Kitchen’s take on life, even with all its tragedies, was more positive than the avant-garde Beckett’s. Still, both keep turning over the memory to try to get it right. Trying to inhabit a space where something in their life shifted.

#

All the other trips out to Tarpon Springs run together. One time, when it was a larger group, we left the beach and downtown area to go grab food at a Wendy’s near the highway, maybe a ten-minute drive. This was in lieu of eating at one of the Greek places closer to the beach. I somehow ended up with ketchup on my shirt and most of our orders were wrong and I think I

smacked my head on the hanging lamp above our table. Still, this seemed to be the place we decided to eat at when in Tarpon Springs as we returned there on subsequent trips.

Another time, I went antiquing with Maggie in the tiny downtown. She enjoyed looking at the jewelry, but I found it to be overwhelming and boring at the same time, never sure what I was actually looking at, befuddled with all the options. In one store we stumbled upon a homemade coffin—presumably a Halloween decoration—laid down like a table. I turned to Maggie and said, “Ha! Look! It’s a coffin table. Get it?” She looked at me slightly annoyed, eyes narrowed, and mouth held tight. It was a common game where I was emphatic about dumb jokes, so I pressed on: “Because it is a table. And a coffin. So, it’s like a coffee table.” She, still with her flat expression, said *yes I get it*. And still I pressed, “Because coffee. Coffin. It’s a pun you see?” Maggie got up and walked away. But still we came back.

On a different trip, we decided to eat at one of the Greek restaurants. Maggie had been there a few times before with people from work. She said it was the best restaurant in the area. Our server was terrible though. Never once filling up our glasses, barely visiting our area though the restaurant was empty. We had to ask another worker who was wrapping silverware in napkins for the check. I don’t even remember the food, just that I didn’t leave a tip. On this trip we walked an area close to the sponge docks and browsed the tiny shops. All of them had something made out of sponges—except perhaps the chocolate shop—bodies full of holes and channels.

Still on another, we played badminton poorly on the beach. And another time we judged a woman whose skin was darkened to a burnt marshmallow. Another time we flew a kite and watched while a plane zoomed dangerously close, or what feels dangerously close in memory. Another time we went in winter, when it was too cold to go in the water. I had on gloves and a

thick jacket. Another time, a toddler walked up to where we were building a sandcastle. Lena looked at the seemingly parentless boy and said “Hello. Want to help us build?” And he proceeded to lift his foot and stomp on the one of our molded mounds of wet sand. The mother ran up in apologies while we laughed from shock.

I spent the better part of a decade here. In high school and in college. With friends, some still around and others not. We never managed to make it out for the Epiphany cross dive like Maggie wanted, however. The event is supposed to celebrate the baptism of Jesus Christ as well as bless the waters. The original community relied on the waters for travel and fishing and the blessings at Epiphany allowed for safe voyages.

#

It wouldn't be until years after I first saw the foam that I would be curious enough about its formation to do a simple Google search to see why it showed up on the beach that day at Howard Park. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), sea foam forms via the agitation of sea water that contains particles such as “dissolved salts, proteins, fats, dead algae, detergents and other pollutants.” The more organic matter in the water, the more likely sea foam is to form. Much like you need fat to make milk froth for a latte, there has to be a perfect moment of agitation and water and sea life for there to be sea foam. Much like Carson and her dual starfishes, sea foam has much to do with timing.

Popular Science expands on the NOAA's explanation. The water must contain a surfactant, which it calls “a kind of sticky molecule that clings to the surface between water and air.” The online magazine adds the surfactant is both “hydrophobic” and “hydrophilic.” In other words, the particles in the water when agitated become almost like a magnet for the water, one side being attracted to the water, the other side being repelled by the water. The side that is

repelled draws itself into the air, while the hydrophilic side holds itself to the water. These surfactants will line up next to each other in a circle with the hydrophobic sides facing out while water slips inside to mingle with the hydrophilic sides. Another liminal space.

#

The last time I was at Howard Park was right before I left Florida and I went alone. My days in Florida were numbered after my acceptance into graduate school so I was checking items off my Florida bucket list. I never got to my favorite winery with blueberry wine in Plant City, and I regretted going to the beach that day.

Howard Park had become more commercialized and touristy—a fact Maggie and I despised when it first started happening. First it was the fee for parking, which we circumvented by parking at the picnic areas then walking the long quasi-pier down to the beach. Then came the bright blue Adirondack chairs one could rent in the peak summer times. Next was the kayak kiosk in the rarely used side beach, an area filled with seaweed. Each new addition took away from what made Howard Park so special. Added another person blocking the view of the sun on water. Howard Park was just some tiny non-descript beach with ubiquitous palm trees and white quartz sand. Florida was full of them. And full of people. But at least before, Howard Park was ours.

Now with all the changes it was no longer a secret shared between friends.

#

The word epiphany comes from the Greek word epiphaneia. The prefix “epi”, essentially a preposition, suggests a closeness—on, near, upon, against. “Phainein” means to “bring to light, cause to appear, show” Some evidence points to “phainein” having some connection to Proto-

Indo-European languages with the root *bha, meaning “to shine” or in other iterations “to speak.”

#

I wasn't meant to go the last time I went, the one before I traded Florida for Memphis.

It was a day I dedicated to errands. My treat to myself was a trip to the beach after I finished long forgotten obligations. Except I forgot to grab sunblock when I first left my house, forcing me into a circuitous stop back at my house to grab the Coppertone. This was the first sign. The second was forgetting my towel after my circuitous stop and only realizing halfway to the park at the buffalo statues. The directions always said to keep going so I forged ahead determined to stop at the Beall's Outlet and buy a cheap towel. Not a perfect situation considering I should have been saving money. But I was too far away from one place or another to turn back and forging ahead and losing money felt better than turning around and losing time.

It felt weird being there without friends, or maybe just weird to be there by myself in a crowd of people. The beach was full in a way it had never been, hordes of people taking advantage of the warm day before summer's end. A few individuals even rented out the beach chairs the park much to my chagrin added a few years ago. I laid out my towel high up on the beach next to a palm tree whose shadow cast shade opposite to where I was. I had no intention of going in the water—it seemed silly to go in there alone and I didn't feel comfortable abandoning my stuff. All I wanted to do was to read on some quiet section of sand while the sun warmed my skin. All I felt was exposed. Another sign.

When the thunderhead started forming out over the Gulf, I knew the storm wouldn't last, that I could wait it out and still enjoy a sunny day and maybe a small tan, but I also knew I didn't want to stay. The gray expanse was telling. Ominous and beautiful all at once. The air became

heavy and the pressure dropped. The once blue horizon turned a nasty shade of gray, a bruise. The boundary between sky and water blurred into intensity. It even felt warmer despite the disappearance of the sun behind the mass of clouds. People started to scramble. I picked up the towel I bought that day and the book I couldn't seem to read and headed to my car. I wanted to get on the road before the storm got too bad, before rain dropped so heavy the road would disappear behind my windshield. Logically, I knew the rain would be over in twenty minutes, tops. Emotionally, I felt otherwise. What Howard Park once was, was no more, and I was headed off to graduate school away from all this, and I wanted both of these to be fine even if they weren't.

Two years after that afternoon storm, and only now I sense that something was in fact lost, something beyond the beach. That something has brought me to the place of *saudade*. Its connection to foam, organic matter. The jutting neighborhoods. The threshold of water. The foam a magnet.

#

So it was on a return trip my first winter back in Tampa after starting graduate school, muscle memory overtook as my car hit the road. I didn't worry about a towel when I got to the buffalos. Or sunblock. Or company. The temperatures had finally dropped from the hottest December on record to cool 60, and I was about to visit one of my favorite places—a winter beach. And convinced we took the long way around the lake, I turned left instead of right.

The sign said Sunset Beach as I pulled up the long narrow road that yielded to a gravelly parking lot. It took me a moment to realize that I was wrong before, that I should have made a right at the stop sign at the Epiphany Lake, that this was not Howard Park. Sunset Beach reminded me of what Howard Park *had been*, though the setup was different. The beach had a

nice pavilion for shade, more like an open-top gazebo. The palm trees were just as plentiful but closer to the shore. The outdoor shower seemed less of an afterthought. The sand also rose in small cliffs, with benches where people could gaze out upon the waters. Missing were the kayaks and chairs. The place was familiar and different all at one, the cousin of a lost friend.

Sunset Beach felt like a new secret. I sat on a bench, contemplating the place. This was not what I was looking for but in other ways it still was.

I only sat for a minute or two staring at nothing in particular but feeling very much outside myself before deciding to go off in search of Howard Park. Back in my car, my phone got confused when I typed “Howard Park” into Google Maps. It put me in one of the expensive beach neighborhoods—the one with houses three stories tall, but entrances on the second floor—only to tell me I had arrived when clearly, I hadn’t. I retraced my wheels back to the Epiphany lake, turned the correct way this time, and followed the road until I found the sign indicating the turnoff for Howard Park.

And then it was there. All pretty much the same. The evergreens in the picnic and play areas still lush. The roads still worn. The same long pier I once walked with friends, when out of stubbornness we refused to pay to park at a place that was once free.

I drove the pier thinking I would park down near the beach and not pay the five dollars when my only intention was to walk the beach for perhaps an hour. It was winter and no one should be around. A maintenance person was working in the parking area dragging a cart of palm dead fronds behind his golf cart when I drove up, however, and I didn’t want to risk a fine. And thus, I ended up walking the pier again, this time alone.

#

The essay I wrote in the style of Kitchen had a second paragraph that ended: *You have to remind yourself missing someone is not the same as loving someone. Or is it the other way around.* In a fit of exhaustion, I tried to pass off my Kitchen-style creative nonfiction two paragraph essay as poem in our graduate poetry workshop. People mostly felt the second paragraph was a waste and most of the emotional work was happening in the first section, except for this line. *Missing someone is not the same as loving someone.*

#

Wind bled through my sweater and my fingers froze in the breeze. I tucked my hands under my armpits to keep them warm. When I saw the shore for the first time, I waited for something heavy to settle in me, but it never came.

A collection of seagulls gathered on the area of the beach where the rented kayaks would launch off. Before the kayak kiosk, people seldom used this area of the beach, due to the seaweed that massed on its shores. It was as if the Gulf knew where to deposit itself, so as not to disrupt man. Even from afar I could see it, however.

Tender clouds dancing on soft waves. Bouncing, refusing to join the depths of the Gulf.

The sea foam collected just under the area where the waves rolled in but below the tangles of seaweed. It clung to the shore under the movement of the water. It still amazed me how delicate and durable sea foam could be. How waves could form it, but not destroy it. Not even the breeze was a match, and bits of foam would move like some tidal tumbleweed down the curved shore. I wanted to cry. Or maybe, wanted to want to cry. Wanted that feeling I felt when I wrote: *You can bury your toes here. Under sand and water and foam. But you cannot hide, from yourself, the company you kept here—the absence from your life.* What I felt I cannot place, except the dullness of absence, or the absence of absence. Being on the precipice unable to fall.

On the driest part of the sand was what I thought at first to be a tiny horseshoe crab. When I walked up to it, it seemed all wrong. The body desiccated. Full yet hollow. Cavernous. It was the missing eyes that finally told me it was only a dead fish and not a horseshoe crab. I wondered about the forces of nature that left it bloated and hollow a few feet up from the delicate foam. If the tide would eventually take it away. If it, too, would eventually become foam.

I walked the beach alone just as I had walked it the first time with Maggie, tracing shores with soles. Squishing my feet in the area where it was equal parts water and sand, knowing now the life just below my feet. Kicking surf as it brushed up against my ankles. I climbed the rocks segmenting the kayak and swim areas of the beach to avoid wading deeper into the Gulf, the place where whirls of foam kept me on previous trips as others moved on to soak in the salt and sand. I paused for a moment on the rocks, snapping pictures with my phone. The contrast of the grey rocks framing the white foam was beautiful. Along the main swim area of the beach another collection of seagulls stood stoic where high tide had left the sand wet and malleable. I took more pictures of their leaf-like footprints, hoping to preserve a delicacy I never once associated with the bird until I saw they were fine as long as you did not have food.

On the opposite side of the beach, the small, private area we rarely used, I made a note in my phone of how the sun on the water was like pinpricks of light moving in specific patterns, like some cosmic marching band. Little specs of light moving between each other, in and out, crossing imaginary boundaries and returning. I wanted to preserve the moment. I wanted to find meaning. But somewhere I reached a point where I realized there was no reason to stay any longer. Even the touristy additions only lasted though summer.

As I was leaving a small child, a new arrival with parents in tow, chased after the seagulls that remained so calm as I passed. I thought of the gentle leaf prints being stamped out by toddler

feet. No one seemed to care as the little boy harassed the birds. The delicate little leaves gone as the foam hit itself against rocks.

Plaques and Tangles

It is a small group of us, but I mostly only remember Lena. She is the one who told me to take the class because it counted as some exit requirement. Or was it some gen-ed requirement? I cannot remember. She is toying around with the idea of declaring gerontology as her major instead of nursing. Both majors are to appease her mother, not ones she has chosen for herself, though the former she seems to enjoy more. This I *do* know.

We are in the Behavioral Sciences building. Or is it the Sociology building?

It doesn't matter seven years and two degrees later, but I want to know. I want to remember. Perhaps just for the simple sake of remembrance. But this is a personality defect. I perceive very few moments as special, worthy of later recollection. There is very little I remember of my younger youth or even my current youth, and I am for shit at keeping a journal, and memories are grains of sand washed out with the tide, there but not.

And I want to know. And I want to remember. I want to get this story right.

#

To make a memory, a long-term one that is, the brain has to encode the message. Information is sent to the hippocampus where the brain creates new synapses, new connections. The hippocampus knows how to prioritize and splits this information, which is why you can recall your first car but not what you had for breakfast last Tuesday.

After a memory has been encoded, the brain needs a place to put this information. Memories start to move to other parts of the brain. Remembering the massive sprinklers of the farms moving across rows of tightly packed tomatoes before getting to her house. Occipital lobe. Remembering the sharp sound for her laugh. Temporal.

The final stage of the memory process is retrieval. Dredging up the memory. Retelling, if only to yourself.

#

This is not my memory. Only a story I can piece together from a handful of pictures my mother has committed to my baby book. My baby book has fewer pictures than those of my brothers. I blame this on me being the youngest, making moments of my youth less special by virtue of birth order and overworked parents. These moments, these firsts—first crawl, first steps—have happened before, twice in fact, with my brothers. It's no big deal. My father can tell me the exact time my oldest brother was born but only tell me I was born in the morning. The hippocampus prioritized and I fell short.

I understand the logic of my family. My parents were tired having me at forty. They worked for us to make new memories. Like trips to Adventure Island and MOSI. Disneyworld and Universal. They tried and there is a baby book and it has these two, or maybe three pictures, others too, but it is these two or three that are special because I can call them up to me in Memphis though they exist physically in Tampa. This makes them meaningful even if I can't remember the moment.

In one picture, I am two, naked save for the puffy white diaper covering my lower half. That and a hat. Bright blue—like the color of my grandmother's eyes I didn't inherit. Plasticity, windbreaker material. Bucket style. My feet planted in the white, soft sand of a beach probably in South Florida with my hands gripping the brim of the hat pulling it closer to my head, missing-toothed grin on my face. As I run these details through my head trying to grasp the picture, I feel a sense of regality, or I would if I were not half-naked and two in the picture. It is a picture of just me and something unlike my brother's pictures.

In another picture my grandmother is wearing the hat shielding her eyes from the Florida summer sun. She looks towards the camera still squinting. I assume it is summer. That is the only time my family had time to make the almost six hour drive to go see her in Homestead. If I am two here, my grandma—my Nana—is sixty-two. She sits with her legs stretched out in front of her in a flowery dress. White and blue. I am not in this picture. It is only my father's mother and my mother, who would be forty-two here. Or maybe it is just my grandmother and my mother is taking the picture. At some point I know it is the three of us. But it all feels fuzzy now and I regret not taking the baby book when I was at my parents this past summer, and I hate that I am losing this clear vision that seemed so sure only months ago.

With all the pictures from my family's past, pictures that I often leaf through in plain curiosity, I do not recall seeing my brothers in these pictures, or any ones like it. The photos are something of just me, in a way youngest children often don't get. A part of me that is attached to my grandmother and my mother. I wish I had these picture with me now even if the thought of them makes me want to cry.

My grandmother gave me the hat. I know this because she is wearing it, then I am wearing it, and it now sits in the linen closet of my childhood home in Tampa, at the bottom in a red basket full of hand towels and a bag of cotton balls. And I got it at this moment at the beach even if I am too young to remember the flowery dress without seeing the picture, my mother in a white shirt with cutoff sleeves. Though with me in Memphis, this hat is no longer mine, or at least it feels this way, as it sits in the red basket another time zone away. And if I did have it with me, I probably would not wear it. It's not my style and it is barely my memory. But I hold onto it, at a distance, as if it were my mother or Nana.

#

Alzheimer's Disease is a progressive and irreversible form of dementia. It is the sixth leading cause of death in the United States, according to the CDC. A 2011 study from the Harvard School of Public Health found it was the second most feared condition. The estimated cost of care in 2015 for those with dementia was about \$226 billion, according to the Alzheimer's Association. This number does not take into account unpaid care, such as by family members, which is estimated at about \$217 billion. Meanwhile, National Health Institute research spending was around \$731 million. The cost of Alzheimer's is projected to be about two percent of Medicare spending in 2020. This number will jump to almost a quarter of Medicare spending by 2040, according to the Alzheimer's Association. By 2050, half of all Baby Boomers, people like my parents, will have Alzheimer's Diseases.

#

I enjoy studying about aging in undergrad, but gerontology is not for me. I discover this in the first class I ever take, Socio-Cultural Aspects of Aging, the class Lena suggested. The teacher has someone from the department come in—a graduate or undergraduate I cannot remember—to conduct a survey for a research project. The room is a big lecture hall and it's easy to disappear. I feel uneasy about my ability to answer an aging questionnaire as the white sheets travel down the row to me. Everyone around me seems to already know about Alzheimer's and Parkinson's Disease.

The survey is about caregiving. I have a loving but complicated relationship with my parents, in particular my mother. We are too similar: emotional and reactive, and just a bit aloof. I once got mad and stormed off because a friend hid a cheap flipflop as a joke. I don't remember many of the things I ever did to anger my mother, but I remember her biting all four of her fingernails at once whenever she was mad at us. When friends say I love you, I tend to respond

with something along the lines of “you’re the best” or “thank you.” Once when a stranger asked if he could steal a chair during a breakfast out, my mom responded with a curt and slightly bewildered “no” instead of the customary *sorry we are saving that for somebody*. I don’t know how to respond to the survey.

I want to be the person that steps up and handles the situation, but thoughts of slow death cause me to become detached, aloof. I am just learning to take care of myself. I don’t want to take care of anyone else. As the daughter, as a student in a gerontology class, society expects me to answer positively when the survey questions asks about my willingness to care for an aging relative, one who needs moderate help with activities of daily living, one who needs major help with instrumental activities of daily living, one with mild cognitive impairment, one with mild, moderate, severe dementia. I hedge my answers. My willingness, middling. I pause over answers while others have fast pencils.

I talk with Lena after class.

“It doesn’t seem that representative to do that kind of survey in a gerontology class,” she says.

I know what she means to say. Gerontology students should be sympathetic to the aging, right? As persons who are studying the complex, physical and emotional aspects of aging, we should be the ones willing to join the vanguard and assist loved ones as they start to decline.

“I don’t know,” I say, “People sometimes have complicated relationships with parents.” I remember later that not everybody in the class is a gerontology major. I’m not yet. So, all these late teens, early-twenty somethings may not be itching to take care of the infirm.

She remembers her reasons for being in the class, that she did not come to this major of her own volition and concedes my point, though I don't think she fully accepts it as a valid answer. "I guess," she says with a shrug.

I do not confess my full callousness, though. My inability to handle such situations. My unwillingness to learn to do so. That the answers I put down on the survey reflected my love of independence more than it did the persons the survey was hypothetically asking about.

#

A literature review in *The Gerontologist* lays out the "psychiatric morbidity" of family caregivers. Seven of the eleven studies looking at gender differences found women to have more depressive symptoms. This applied to both spousal and adult children caregivers. In fact, the female participants in the study were "close to or above the cutoff score...for being considered at risk for clinical depression." Meanwhile, the mean scores for men fell below this value. Women caregivers also reported more anxiety and lower life satisfaction. These findings that were linked to caregiving were not the result of natural patterns in female depressive psychology. In short women caregivers are at a higher risk of depression and other mental illnesses *because of* caregiving.

#

I have very few memories with my grandmother, though she held the only role of grandparent in my life. Her second husband, my father's father, died when my dad was just a teenager. She eventually remarried a man who gave her a fourth son and she was happy. All my cousins called him Papa Bob, but he also died before I was born. On my mother's side was the mother we didn't talk to until I was almost a teenager and whom I sardonically called *abuela*, and the father

and his second wife whom I only ever referred to as Julio and Jean though I knew his technical role in the “family.”

The abuela left my mom with caretakers as she went out and had sex with men who were not her husband (and also not Julio), who was away on active duty. She never encouraged Spanish speaking in my mother, preferring she had her own secret language. The abuela had her boyfriend’s ashes buried next to her final husband, her third husband and the only one she married before having a child with. Julio apparently wasn’t around much when my mom was a child. I don’t know if he had other children or grandchildren, only that he had a Shar-Pei named Hop Sing. That, and we had a picture of Julio and his wife, Jean, on our wall. I asked my mom in my twenties what happened to Julio and she said, “Oh. I think he died. I don’t know.”

This is my inheritance. Detachment. Aloofness.

I do recall one summer though. My parents, at the time, presented my brother Matt’s and my time down in Homestead as a special vacation just for us, time with our Nana. During a typical family vacation, we only had a week to see her, and this time was shared with other family. This time, however, our parents dropped us off for the entire summer. Adult Me now understands my parents were working and that’s why Nana was watching us.

What I recall of this time is not particularly happy, or at least the collections of memories I lump into this time are not. I cannot pull from the reaches the happy memories I know I had. The ones that make me said thinking about Nana now.

We went to the mall once. Her neighbor, Inez, gave me a dollar before we left, though she was not coming with us. I put it in my green puffy vinyl wallet with the few other dollar bills I somehow had acquired feeling extra special, knowing exactly where I wanted to spend my money. At Claire’s, a ring must have caught my eye, so exquisite, I don’t even remember what it

looked like. I remember, however, my grandmother's anger and embarrassment when I couldn't get the ring off. Her trying to pull it off and my finger becoming pink and tender.

A kind worker was finally able to weasel it off with some Windex—she must have dealt with this all the time—but before I could continue looking my grandmother was dragging me out of the store by my wrist as punishment for being a child.

#

In “Emerging Adulthood: What Is It, and What Is It Good For?” author and research psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnet revisits a recently posited term for the period of late teens to mid-twenties—emerging adulthood. The concept applies mostly to industrialized societies where roles in youth are more flexible when compared to developing societies. Previous understanding of developmental psychology from Erick Erickson proposed young adulthood to be the period between late teens and age forty. Arnet suggests emerging adulthood is a time when emerging adults are trying to explore and establish identities. It is the time of the “self-focused age.”

During this time, emerging adults are delaying adulthood milestones, like marriage, to enjoy the freedom this transitional period offers. It is a time of possibility and independence.

#

I know there are happy memories with Nana but they seem all covered up. Plaques and tangles, but not quite. One summer around middle school I recall crying for days after we left Homestead. I would've traded all of my friends to live down in South Florida with Nana and my family during this time. Logically, I know hormones played a large role in this reaction, but as a soon-to-be teenager, I was willing to trade everything for more time with Nana.

When I draw up pictures in my head now, Nana is always smiling. Her mouth was sunshine.

#

I like the teacher in *Socio Cultural Aspects of Aging*, which is why I take another gerontology class though my major is journalism. What I really want to do is write or act, but I come from an extensive line of practical people. Nana is Depression era minted, no nonsense. My mother lived in a trailer and ate baked bean sandwiches before she met my father. I don't know how to talk to my family about my romantic career desires, even though they are supportive and let me make my own decisions. So meanwhile, I keep taking gerontology classes with Lena because they count as electives, deciding at some point to get a minor.

I like thinking about aging in a complex and abstract way. How in a standard study of older adults—never, not ever, the elderly!—sixty five is the mark of older adulthood, but within special populations like the older homeless or the older incarcerated, older adulthood shrinks because of the shorter life expectancy. How society tries to define age as some indicator of life and health. How the world is undergoing a major demographic shift thanks to aging Baby Boomers. The measurement of one's chronological age versus one's functional age.

“Studies have consistently shown, we as humans peak at thirty,” the teacher says.

It not a statistic meant to scare us into being better healthier humans. It's just a fact. I try to apply it to my own life and make better choices. To cut down on fried foods. To not binge on sweets. To legitimately exercise. To attempt quasi-normal sleep patterns. None of these happen of course, because even while I am studying aging, I reject that it has any practical application in my life. It's all abstract.

As an undergrad, thirty is years and years off. I have time to rectify my life choices. As for my parents who are just shy of older adulthood, how can I take on a role akin to caregiver—*you should eat more vegetables; maybe you should walk the dogs more, it will be great for you*

both; I would really like to see you both retire soon—when the logic of my family makes navigating these spaces difficult?

So I just repeat the statistic any time someone starts complaining about how old they feel, or how their body doesn't move like it used to, or how their mind hasn't caught up with their body and they think they can do things they can no longer do.

“It's all downhill after thirty. Isn't that comforting?”

#

I fear I am conflating and compositing memories as I look back on the summer at my grandma's. The summer she slapped my hand as I tried to dip my French fry in my frosty at Wendy's. The summer she put my hair in curlers because, as she put it, she was “tired of seeing it my face.” I looked like Shirley Temple and I hated it. The summer she made me sit at the table alone finishing dinner because I picked out the tomatoes of the pasta dish she made for us. Matt went off with our uncle to the ballpark and Nana went to the kitchen to wash dishes and I was all alone as I ate all the tomatoes I picked out.

As the descendent of practical people, I feel like these facts will help me to understand the people that I love, to help me make choices based on my love for them. So I want to find that happiness I know is there. The happiness that prompted me to cry and cry when we left the summer when I was 12. The one that conjures her smile. The one who can see her monthly letters when I was in high school and college that contained at least one “Ha!” in perfect sloping cursive.

But when I look back, I think of that summer. And I think mostly clearly of the Walls of Jericho.

#

My grandmother has immaculate blue carpet throughout her house. I wonder how it stays so with all the family that seems to be there. It doesn't occur to me that uncles and aunts and cousins only visit more often when other people are in town, that their visits, while not rare, are not typical. It doesn't occur to me how much my grandmother is like this carpet—from another time, but still polished and clean. Classic.

Nana must be in the kitchen or the family room. She is at least not down the hallway where all the bedrooms are, where Matt and I are. I am in Nana's room for some reason. It would make sense as I sleep in her king-sized bed with her. She says I kick and thrash some nights, but it is more of a joke (though it is true) and less of a complaint. She doesn't leave the bed to sleep on the couch, though she could.

Matt always tries out wrestling moves on me. My other brother Noah does too, but he will stop if I tell him to. Matt's favorite move is the Walls of Jericho. He is impressed I can wriggle out if I catch him in time. The men on TV cannot even do this. We are too young to realize the fallacy of wrestling.

It is not mean, the wrestling. I don't remember why or how it started. But I know it was not meant to be mean.

We were both probably bored. Maybe Nana banished us to the back end of the house while she watched her soaps. Maybe we didn't want to deal with learning the station numbers and never bothered to watch TV at Nana's anyway. But once he starts, I want him to stop. Even as an adult looking back, I want him to stop.

He flips me onto my stomach, and I try to twist back around and crawl out from under his legs. He gets the edge on me though, and I am stuck facing the wall with the window as he lowers himself into a squat facing the opposite wall, my belly on the ground. He lowers his

weight onto me as he lifts my lower body, his arms locked around my calves. He lifts and twists my legs back towards my head while I beg him to stop, but he persists, so I am forced to do what I do when I am home.

I wriggle my head to the side wanting my screams and cries to reach the other end of the house instead of the blue carpet it was just buried in. But my parents are not here to save me. They have left Matt and me in Homestead for the summer. It is my grandmother who comes into the room, livid, like my mother with her nail biting.

She reprimands me for screaming. I have to stay in her room with nothing to do except stare at walls. I don't understand. All I did was cry.

I don't know why I am in trouble when Matt is the one who hurt me. Whenever fights get out of hand at home, even just play ones, we're both punished, but it doesn't make me feel like I'm bad. Like I feel now. My mom has the offending parties hug for five minutes. Her theory being "if you guys want to touch each other so bad, then you're going to hug." We always complain about the hugs at the start, but by the end we giggle from the absurdity of it. But now I'm mad that Matt hurt me, but I got in trouble for expressing that hurt.

What happens to Matt, I do not know, nor does he remember. It was not important to him. The info entered the hippocampus and went nowhere.

#

According to Paul Rozin and Edward B. Royzman in "Negativity Bias, Negativity Dominance, and Contagion," some evidence suggests a negativity bias in childhood memories though general research points towards a positivity bias. That is, children are more likely to remember negative experiences over positive ones. It appears over time, however, individuals accrue more positive memories that ultimately "neutralize" the negative ones.

#

Death and Dying should be a fun class. How cultures view death. How an individual and groups mourn. The class counts as another exit requirement or something similar, which is how I end up here. Though I may have been the one to convince Lena this time. I remember nothing from this class save for the fact I always do crosswords instead of listening to the teacher. She gives me a B though I don't think my work is too different from Lena's, who also does not listen to the teacher but seems a bit shocked when I end up with a B.

Lena has finally settled on gerontology as her major officially, though what she will do with this she isn't sure. I have recently switched from print journalism to broadcast journalism after reading a daunting course description online. I also do not have a career objective in mind—aside from graduation—or love for either subject. But it seems too late in the game to switch majors to something outside of journalism, something that I could perhaps be passionate about.

I want to remember something else from Death and Dying though, other than my proclivity for word puzzles. This seems like one of the more important aspects of aging. Not everyone will get cancer or dementia, arthritis or osteoporosis, but everyone will die. Shouldn't we have a better understanding of how culture influences people's relationship with death and dying? Shouldn't we examine our own feelings and understanding sooner rather than later?

In African-American cultures, death is often a celebration of life. I remember that. That when a person dies, sure it is sad, but there is also this whole life to be venerated. But this doesn't jive with what I've known of death. I've only ever been to wakes and these seem like formal depressing affairs that don't fit within the logic of doesn't-even-celebrate-birthdays father and goofy mother.

I think about my own life and my own family. I try to imagine any one of them dying and how I would feel. Or what I would do. I want to be the type of person that pours one out. But mostly I think of how in my family we barely celebrate birthdays. That I love birthdays and seem to be an aberration in my family.

#

Edward R. Ratner and John Y. Song suggest in their 2002 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, “Education for The End of Life,” that universities should be doing more to teach students about death and dying. The pair discuss perceptions of death versus the reality. Media often show traumatic deaths, but most deaths occur from chronic illness and in institutionalized care. Diseases such as cancer, heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. In places like nursing homes and hospitals, though there is a recent push to die in our own homes. The pair note that universities’ death and dying courses, “treat dying as a separate field of study, rather than as a part of everyone's future.”

Most people are shocked when I say my undergraduate major was gerontology. I often have to explain that it is different than geriatrics.

#

I am sure I have some happy memories at Nana’s. And I fear the negative feelings that are popping up are some abnormal psychology designed to protect me from the present reality. That if I can be upset with her, I won’t have to be sad about her mental degeneration. That if I can be mad, then I won’t have to care.

It always felt special to walk into her house, and I would always have to explore every inch. From the stone dry sink in the small linoleum foyer housing various styled hats for the various Pittsburgh sports teams, to the three quilted, puffy photo albums on the shiny coffee table

in the front room. The front room also was home to the barely-used matching white loveseat and couch, along with an upholstered gray rocking chair. It was a room more admirable than functional.

In the craft room I would leaf through her old copies of *Little Bear* and open closets filled with stuff my grandmother could not have possibly been using—clothes and holiday decorations, plastic storage totes containing secrets I dare not open. I loved the table lamp in the craft room, with its chain pull and satisfying *zzzz-clink*. In the guest room I would open every last trinket box to see what treasures they stored—rings and buttons, sometimes nothing. Or the bureau to discover what Nana felt worthy of keeping. Old letters, in elegant curves similar to her cursive, pens that seemed fancy to my nine-year-old self. In her room I would open all her jewelry boxes—all shaped like books—to admire the collection she had amassed. Large clip-on earrings and strands of pearls, broaches she would wear to church on Sunday. Sure, most of my exploration was pure curiosity and boredom, but on another level, I wanted to know the house. To know the person who lived there.

It was the wedding wall I stared at most. It took up so much space in the front room. And Nana and Papa Bob seemed impossibly happy.

Pictures from all four of her sons' weddings. These were memories that could never be mine. All but one happening before I was born. Nana looked so young in her picture, still with a twinge of red in her hair I occasionally see in my own. So unabashedly happy, staring into the face of a man I was not fated to meet. Her face plastered with the smile I see when I try to bring her up in my apartment in Memphis, tinted in sepia. I found out in my twenties that the center picture—the one with Nana and Papa Bob—was actually from my parents' wedding.

“People don’t realize that was from your wedding,” Nana said to my mother, “I was so happy that day.”

We were all at her dining room table. Nana, my mother, and me. Another moment of just us. The whole family was down for my cousin’s wedding, but it was just the three of us at the table. I don’t know where everyone else was. It was one of the few moments I can recall that my grandmother ever allowed herself to reflect openly on the past. She acted as caregiver for so many—two husbands, neighbors and friends like Lois and Vivian. I vaguely remember going to their houses with her the summer Matt and I stayed with her as she checked in on them and brought by some food.

I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing. I got the sour feeling in the back of my mouth that happens when you realize the adults in your life are human. She was a woman who had loved and lost two husbands. Survived an abusive first husband. Lived in England with three small children in the 50s. Many of her friends were dead, along with a brother. She had a rich, past life I never asked about. Only made-up stories about from pictures around her house.

I was maybe twenty-one. Or twenty two?

My mother sixty-two, almost an older adult. Nana eighty-two, likely starting to develop plaques and tangles, even if she isn’t exhibiting outward signs.

#

Psychology of Aging, like Sociocultural aspects of Aging, is in a big lecture hall. I do not have Lena this time. She has already taken the class. Nor do I have my favorite teacher in the program. I do not learn the difference between fluid and crystalized intelligence for the fourth time in my life and third time in the gerontology program—my hippocampus just doesn’t care—but I do well in the class.

I am mostly quiet. There to get the credit hours towards my minor I won't use in any capacity after graduation. I try to speak up once towards the end of the semester when the teacher prompts a discussion about traumatic brain injury and the implications for military and football persons. A good number in the class have no sympathy for the football players emerging in the news with signs of mental illness related to injuries sustained while playing football.

“Come on they get paid millions each year,” they say.

I think of what it must be like to have a part of you go missing, to lose control over aspects of yourself. To no longer know yourself. To longer be yourself. My words tumble over the emotions as I try to express the tragedy of continued and repeated loss.

#

This memory is not mine but one I construct from a home video my family discovered when reorganizing our movie library from VHS to DVD. It is at Nana's house.

The camera pans to the collection of my cousins and brothers sitting on the white couch and love seat of Nana's front room pushed together to make a small bed. No one is happy in this video. The camera pauses a second on a few faces all stuck in consternation. I do not realize I am missing from this collection until the camera moves around to the round, dark wood table off from the kitchen.

It is all adult legs until the camera finds me, red and purple lipped sucking on a lollipop. I am five, six, no more than seven. I sit on the blue carpet I can only ever associate with Nana wedged near the legs of a dining chair.

I am old enough to eat a lollipop on my own, so I am old enough to remember this moment, but I don't.

I am happy though. That I do know. As a giggle and grin between licks.

No one in my family remembers this moment as it plays across our TV, negative memories erased with more positive ones.

“Well you look happy with yourself,” my mom says jokingly.

My dad and brothers just laugh and smile while I stare at the screen confused.

#

The plaques and tangles come in Physical Aspects of Aging. I take the class with Lena sometime between Socio Cultural Aspects and Psych of Aging. The teacher is pretty. Young. A graduate student in the Ph.D. program specializing in Alzheimer’s. We learn about the deterioration of the body, but I remember nothing but the plaques and tangles, the physical manifestation of cognitive dysfunction. They are the harbingers of Alzheimer’s, of dementia. They are the reasons we begin to lose ourselves.

We learn about Alois Alzheimer, a German psychiatrist. How in 1906 a woman died with a mental illness after exhibiting unexplained “memory loss, language problems, and unpredictable behavior.” Upon her death, Alzheimer examined her brain and discovered what are now known to be amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles, disruptions in the communication of the brain. He named the disease after himself, still not knowing fully what it was.

Alzheimer’s Disease is believed to start in the hippocampus—the area of the brain responsible for encoding memories. Alzheimer’s patients lose the ability to form new memories and slowly lose the memories they already have, all because of the plaques and tangles.

We watch a video on spouses caring for demented loved ones. Families convinced the person is still there. But even with my limited knowledge, I know. They left. There is no them. They haven’t died yet, but they are gone.

There is nothing left when the plaques and tangles have finally pervaded.

#

My mom messages me. I am checking emails in Memphis—which are mostly junk, advertising sales and coupons—when I hear the funny little *pop* from another tab open on my computer. My cell phone follows up with its own *ding*. Facebook. I finish perusing the Kroger ad online before I check to see what she has to say.

It's a picture of a jar of Maggi, a seasoning she often used in cooking when I was younger but disappeared from the shelves of our local grocery store a few years ago. It tastes like a saltier soy sauce. I found some in Memphis shortly after I moved and purchased it despite my limited budget, and despite the fact I only had chicken back at my apartment and no desire to buy a pound of beef for a single person.

“Can you believe they have this in Homestead but not in Tampa?” she writes.

“It happens,” I say.

She also mentions something about a “Cuban mop” leaving me confused. Says she will send a picture later. “Of the mop,” she adds in case I didn't understand. Says the family down there—my father's brothers and their wives—is driving her insane, that she will have to call me to tell me all the stories.

A few weeks earlier she told me Nana tried to drive to the bank and ended up thirty miles from her house. She dropped this info like it was a feather with no weight of implications. No softening of the blow, no *sorry we are saving that for somebody*. That is why she is in Homestead. And I think of what I know of Alzheimer's: degenerative, progressive, irreversible.

That is why I am glad I am in Memphis.

#

From the CDC: “Alzheimer’s disease is the only cause of death among the top 10 in America that cannot currently be prevented, cured, or even slowed.”

#

I think of what a complicated relationship actually is because I have never known a simple one. The problem with “complicated” relationships is that we love people despite them not being what we want them to be. This is what makes them complicated, but the love is what makes it the relationship.

My mother tells me, “Nana has had a few accidents,” she has had to clean and it reminds me of another fact from my gerontology education: it is not always the daughter who becomes caregiver for an aging parent, but the wife of the eldest son.

When my oldest brother got married, I repeated this statistic to his now ex-wife, “Usually the burden of caregiving falls to the wife of the oldest son. Comforting, huh?”

I meant it as a joke. A small jab. But it was a great relief when Noah got married.

I feel ill equipped to care for a cat let alone another human being. And I don’t want to navigate family reactions that are sure to range from romanticism (“I think she recognized me today”) to unhelpful interference. I’ve seen too many videos on dementia and Alzheimer’s to want to be there.

So when I think of my grandmother and her dementia and my family’s denial of her state, I feel a sense of obligation I fear I won’t take on.

But mostly I think of a house I so vividly remember and memories I cannot recall and blue carpet once immaculate destroyed by the decaying human mind.

So, I push myself to remember the numerous videos I had to watch and what doctors tell family caregivers when caregiving becomes too hard: “The patient is not the illness.”

I will myself instead to think of the last memory I have of my grandmother, our last moment together.

It's my cousin's wedding and my uncle has just dropped my brothers and me back at Nana's where we are staying with our parents. I am a little tipsy from avocado wine and mango wine, and just a little bit of vodka. I do not want my grandmother to see me this way, though I think she would probably find it a little amusing. I rush to the craft room where I've been sleeping, pull the chain of the table lamp to hear its always satisfying *zzzz-clink*, and gather my pajamas so I can take a shower.

In the shower, one I've always found special because of its sliding doors, I force myself to throw up the remaining alcohol in my stomach and stay under the slow stream of water until I am no longer tired. I close my eyes as I wash my skin and hair looking at the collection of soaps Nana has amassed—usually just Suave White Rain and Olay in the yellow bottle. After I'm finished and dressed, I walk back to the front of the house to get a glass of water, but my mom and grandmother are still in the backroom so I decide to join them instead.

“You going to bed?” my mother asks.

“Soon. Not yet,” I say as snuggle up next to her on the blue, plaid couch, straight from the 70s.

“Good. You don't want to go to bed with wet hair.” Nana says from the couch opposite us.

I can't remember what she is working on. Or if she is watching TV. Or what we talk about. I can't remember how long I stay there. But it is something of the three of us. And I know it's special as I call it up to me in Memphis.

Life Cycle of Tadpoles

August 4, 2004

A tropical wave develops off the coast of Africa, the second to happen in as many weeks. Initial images of the emerging storm, according to the National Hurricane Center, are “not particularly impressive.”

#

_____ **2015**

I sit on my bed in Memphis in my second apartment in as many years. The rain falls outside and eyes move to the bluish stain at the foot of my bed. Fact: it happened in my first apartment months ago, before I even started looking for a new place to live. Also fact: it shouldn't have happened. The apartment I was at had an apartment-owned desk, and had I painted my nails there, I would not have had to carry the stain with me to my new place where it now distracts me as I type in bed. It looks like a hurricane moving across the green expanse of my coverlet.

For all the angst I felt when washing and washing and washing again failed at abating the stain's presence in my life, I now see there is something to be said for the stain's endurance, that for better or worse something of my new city will remain long after I'm gone from it. Surely something as important deserves a name.

#

August 7-9, 2004

As the system moves west across the Atlantic, the storm becomes better organized. The Tropical Analysis and Forecast Branch (TAFB) and the Satellite Analysis Branch (SAB) put the first discernable center for the storm near 9°N, 47°W just before midnight Coordinated Universal

Time (UTC) on Aug 7. This places the storm over two thousand miles away from Homestead, Florida, where Hurricane Andrew hit in late August of 92 as a Category-4 storm. In 2002, Andrew was posthumously upgraded to a Category-5, as initial reports of wind underestimated the strength of the storm.

It is still too early to tell what will happen with this newly forming storm. And much too early to make comparisons. It is too early to know the destruction waiting in the wave. What weather it will contain. Still, I watch the news hoping something might come of it.

#

August 14-15, 1992

Andrew, too, forms from a tropical wave. But he doesn't have a name yet, barely has a body, as he emerges from the western coast of Africa. According to the National Hurricane Center, about 60 tropical waves pass through the Atlantic each year, about twenty percent of these become a well-formed storm, and from these only a few become hurricanes. Even fewer become major hurricanes with winds above 110 miles per hour.

The wave passes over west Africa moving at about 20 kt. "steered by a swift and deep easterly current," moving into the North Atlantic Ocean. This current carries the tropical disturbance just south of the Cape Verde Islands, located about 670 kilometers from the Senegal coast of Africa, in just a day. The TAFB and SAB determine the storm is "sufficiently well-organized" to begin using the Dvorak analysis technique to measure the storm's intensity. The organizations will continue tracking the system well past the time it makes its first landfall in the US.

#

_____ **2015**

I make a right onto Walnut Grove in Memphis from High Point. A friend showed me the backway to get to campus and I am thankful for the scenic route on my morning drives when I make my left a street or two up and ride around the Links at Galloway, a golf course located between my apartment and the university.

Galloway seems to be a little pocket—one of the few—of the moderately wealthy in a city that has inched its way under my skin to where I miss the sound of the train when I am away for too long—a mistuned piano, a discordant horn, the low hum of thunder as the train presses on—but can still be best described as affordable. Galloway is, at a minimum, the baseline of upper-middle class. The houses are large, some with gated driveways, others with sloping, impeccable lawns. Each one is unique. One looks like a fancy cottage. Another a plantation style manor. Another an Italian villa. In one yard, a sign advertising the house is on the market declares the architecture to be “French Inspired.” The posts on the sign look like permanent stone fixtures. I don’t know what forces transpired to create the area, but Galloway is a nice reprieve from the congestion of the main highways, and I enjoy the undulating paths.

The sun often blinds me as my wheels turn over asphalt, the shade from large oaks not reaching across the roads in all areas. I am terrified most days I may hit one of the morning joggers as the sun casts glare across my windshield, or careen into the deep ditches on either side of the road. It’s been cloudy lately though. My drives more comfortable, dreary fall weather settling in, making home in the skies, leaving the need for the shaded portions of the road non-existent.

The previous weekend dumped a steady rain into the sand traps around the golf course, turning the dry land into water hazards filled with what looks like algae. The sun has taken

refuge behind clouds in the days since, and with the sky a blanket ombré of white and grey, I wonder how long the water will sit where it's not intended to be.

#

August 16-17, 1992

The storm begins rotating around a clear center with narrow bands of clouds spiraling from this on Aug. 16. TAFB and SAB place the storm at a Dvorak T-number of 2.0—a tropical depression.

Initial environmental factors keep the storm from intensifying, but these factors diminish midday on Aug 17. The depression strengthens, and at 1200 UTC, the first named storm of the 92 Atlantic Hurricane season emerges. His name, Andrew.

Andrew keeps moving swiftly west-northwest towards the Lesser Antilles. I am barely four at the time and do not know this, but other family members likely keep a watchful eye.

#

_____ 2015

It's raining in Memphis again. A Memphis rain of all-day showers that means I can wear my bright yellow raincoat should I decide to leave the comforts of my nail polished stained bed, that blue mass on the sea of green. My room is drenched in the orange glow of the fan light as shadows dance about the room in waves. And I should be working on anything else except these words I am committing to the white space of my computer, but essays swirl about my head so I put down the lesson planning, and the essay grading, and the student critiques, to write. To leave my mark on paper. What I am not quite sure.

Small segments I hope to use. A thread about the freak rain in Tampa this past summer: *It's not like our usual afternoon storm either, my father told me. It's just all-day rain.* Another

about the thunderstorm that woke me in Memphis my first year here: *I stand with my fingers spreading slats staring at the rain. It's calming.* This one now about the rain outside my window lulling me from my work. Or this line, right now, about the rain last night that was hitting something metal like music.

Plink...plink plink...plink.

But I don't hear it now. The music of the metal. Something is gone.

But the rain has inspired at least this, so something remains.

#

August 8-9, 2004

The TAFB and SAB assign the first Dvorak T-numbers for the storm, suggesting the storm is intensifying and should be watched. A body is forming in the vast expanse of the Atlantic.

By noon UTC on Aug 9, the wave officially becomes a tropical depression. Later this evening, the storm works its way into the southeastern Caribbean Islands. A high-pressure system in the area pushes the tropical depression west-northwest, the storm steered by currents.

#

In fifth grade. I tried to keep tadpoles as pets. An El Niño had settled over Florida drenching all parts home. Water pooled around the gutters and edged the tops of the retention ponds throughout my neighborhood. Gutters were swollen with the sky as the water tried to forge new paths down the roads. The golf course and baseball park next to my subdivision sat under inches of water for weeks. School, six miles north, is where I found my would-be pets.

The rain got so bad on the road leading up to the school the city had to erect a permanent iron and metal sign warning drivers "Road Under Water." It seemed superfluous. The road had

been flooded for weeks, making the bus ride down the narrow road seem treacherous to my ten-year-old self. The one good outcome of the dreary weather was the tadpoles. Water collected in the small gullies of the small field adjacent to the swing sets and jungle gyms. Soon there were tadpoles.

For some reason, teachers didn't seem to mind kids walking back into classroom with plastic cups filled with rainwater and little black swimmers. Nor did the bus driver stop anyone as we entered with our open cups and transported new-found friends the six miles back to our places in suburbia. My mother was even supportive when I placed my own clear, plastic cup on the small patio outside our front door, the most logical home to my tiny zoo. I don't think she had the heart to ask me to toss them out.

My time attempting to raise tadpoles was short lived. Because fifth graders rarely make good parents and tadpoles almost never make good pets, and plastic cups make terrible homes.

#

_____ **2015**

In Memphis, the rain continues as I keep searching for the reason why a few drops of water can send me to this place of meaning. Why I notice the rain sounds different on concrete than it does on earth. Why I like them both.

#

August 17-20, 1992

An area of high pressure in the Atlantic keeps the storm further south while currents nudge Andrew towards a low-pressure system, which helps slow the hurricane's movement across the Atlantic. This slight change saves the Lesser Antilles from the storm.

According to the NOAA, this small change also places the storm in a “southwesterly vertical wind shear” as well as an area of “quite high surface pressures to its north,” resulting in “a rather remarkable evolution” for the storm.

#

My best friend Lena talked of buying a house before I ever thought it possible to leave Tampa. She was the second person roughly my age that week to bring up the idea of settling down. It caught me off-guard this idea of the surety of the permanence of home. Foundations meant to weather any storm. As we sat on her car, I looked out at the night sky and all the possibilities and felt a little trapped.

Lena graduated on time, like me, with a degree she didn’t want to use. But unlike me, she had a mother who made her. She got a job in insurance shortly afterwards, passing up a weekend trip to Orlando to take the call that landed her a job in the exciting world of medical insurance. Lena had her life together whereas I graduated (a year and a half late) and still worked retail, because what do you do with a broadcast journalism degree when you sort of hate the business. I decided a major too late and discovered I hated it too late and felt, therefore, it was too late to change paths.

I didn’t know what to say as she tried to set roots and make a permanent life. I faked like I knew what I was talking about.

“You know I recently came across this interesting website that tells you if it’s more cost-effective to buy or rent,” I said. “You should check it out.”

“No. I have already. I’ve been looking at prices for a while now. It’s better to buy.”

Her surety scared me. We were in our mid-twenties and she was making semi-permanent life choices. I couldn’t muster a reason to find a real job and break out of retail. I had looked at

writing jobs online in an effort to utilize my journalism background but never found anything interesting, a handful of copywriter positions propagating someone else's ideas. Something was holding me back though I couldn't see what it was.

“Do you really want to settle down in Tampa?” I asked.

“Yea. Jeff and I talked about it.”

I internally winced when she brought up the boyfriend, the small pang of something of importance fading into ambivalence.

I liked Jeff. Of all the guys Lena brought into our friend group, Jeff was the least problematic. He was slightly older, mature. My biggest concern was him being too settled, in search of something serious. Not too long ago, Lena seemed to be in a dating around phase. I nicknamed one of the guys Puppy. I knew Jeff and she were serious, too, when a year into their relationship Lena hadn't brought up to me once a notion of wanting to breakup or feeling bored as she had with every other guy she dated before. Her major complaint was “I like him too much.” Two months into dating every other guy she said, “I should break up with him.” But not with Jeff.

I don't know how long I let the silence hang between us before I let out, “I feel like there is more out there, you know. I kind of want to see life. Know what I mean?” She paused, not saying anything. I added, “I just don't know what there is for me in Tampa” to fill the silence between us.

#

August 20, 1992

Satellite images show Andrew is unable to sustain the production of deep convection needed to sustain itself. And the convection the storm is able to produce seems to dissipate within hours.

Due to this, the tropical storm maintains surface winds only reaching 40kt. However, the pressure in the system remains “astonishingly high” at 1015 mb.

#

_____ **2015**

I am in the process of editing an essay for a reading I have in a few days and finding the revision process difficult. The issue I am finding with the essay for the reading is the fact the person who wrote that essay no longer exists. That version of myself slowly faded without me ever realizing it. Instead of bemoaning the lack of Publix, I now complain about the Memphis drivers or the Poplar Kroger. Instead of talk of café con leche, I sip strong coffee and I think about time.

I want to keep that original essay to keep *her*. The young woman missing Publix and its bakery and its BOGO deals. The Floridian missing amazing Cuban food: the true ambrosia of café con leche and her mother’s boliche. The person in transition trying to make sense of home.

I want to make a new essay to keep the new me. The young woman who used to feel she was timid but realizes she takes risks. The Floridian who misses thunderstorms—real afternoon thunderstorms like clockwork!—but more importantly can find deeper meaning in the water cycle. The person in transition trying to make sense of herself.

What can remain of me?

What can remain of her?

Where do either of these people fit?

#

When I posted on Facebook the news of my acceptance into graduate school my family greeted me with the ubiquitous “congrats” and “we are so proud of you” or the “we know you’ll do great.” It was nice, the outpouring of love, however obligatory it felt. The fact I could get out of

Tampa didn't always feel real, but when it did, I appreciated the support and love from my friends and family. From the bunch, my favorite cousin offered, "You know the University of Tampa has a creative writing program as well," with a smile emoticon following.

The comment didn't rub me the wrong way. It was nice to have a non-standard reaction to celebratory news. It made her "Sweet!" before the question feel more genuine. The cousin had an affinity with the university being a photographer for them. On some level I knew she was just trying to rep for UT—a beautiful, private university with Moorish architecture in downtown Tampa, right on the Hillsborough river, close to the Bay. I actually considered the University of Tampa for a second until I remembered the reason I passed on it as an undergraduate: cost.

How could I justify paying so much to stay in one place?

One of the reasons for going back to graduate school was to make up for what I lacked being a commuter student as an undergraduate. For only going through the motions of college. For getting two degrees I knew I wouldn't use, that I didn't really want, that didn't entirely fit me. For listening to outside voices saying I had to be practical. For letting the outside voice become the inside voice, for thinking she was right. I wanted to get out of Tampa. Maybe even Florida. I wanted to "immerse myself in a creative environment with like-minded individuals chasing similar goals," if I am to believe the letter of intent I wrote.

I replied to my cousin's comment with some nonsensical babble about almost not even applying to schools that year ending with "to make a long story short, Memphis has a nonfiction track and is giving me some money. Oh, yea, it's also a great program," followed with my own smile emoticon.

I recently went back and looked at the exact exchange. The cousin's full comment was, "You know UT has in MFA in creative writing. [smile emoticon] Too close to home???"

I don't know what this means, or what the cousin meant when she said, "Too close to home????". But I know when my friend in the program says she is "going back home," she means Georgia not her house in Memphis; whereas I say "I am going back to Florida" or "heading back to Memphis" as I visit and leave my parents in summer and winter.

#

August 10, 2004.

The tropical depression intensifies, officially becoming a tropical storm. His name is Charley. He is the third named storm of the 2004 Atlantic Hurricane season. Charley continues his path into the Central Caribbean Sea continuing to strengthen.

My junior year of high school has just started, and I await to see what path Charley will take, if Hillsborough County will cancel classes.

#

_____ **2015**

The students veer off topic in my second class of the day. This is usually where I find my groove, where I can correct mistakes from my previous lesson plan, but today I have lost some control over the class so I talk about myself, my move to Memphis, people's question of where I'm from, the follow-up question of why would I ever leave there.

It's fair enough question. When I first moved, *Forbes Magazine* rated Memphis the fourth most dangerous city in America. A year later the city climbed to number two. "Why did you move to Memphis? Hell, I would have stayed in Florida," a student interjects as I explain the magnitude of my move to this no longer foreign city.

I shrug from my position at the head of the class. Over a year in, I don't know how I ended up in Memphis except that I did, and I like being in some place new. I feel obligated to

give my students insight, however, so I give the same answer I gave my cousin, “They offered me money.”

I hate saying this. It cheapens my reasons for being here. As if I wouldn't be in Memphis if the university didn't offer funding. *They offered me money.* It is the truth but also a lie. But I have to finish the class and can't spend too much time in thought here. A student from the front row asks if I plan to stay or go back to Florida. They don't see the cool restaurants of Memphis. The sense of community that permeates the city. They don't realize I left Florida for the same reason they don't want to stay in Memphis. They think of Florida as only beaches. They don't see Memphis as a permanent home.

I jut out my lower lip and shrug again. I don't know where paths will take me.

#

August 11-12, 2004

Charley approaches Jamaica as a hurricane. The eye passes southwest of the southwest coast of the island at midnight UTC on August 12. The hurricane's path then moves north-westward, instead of west-northwest, in the direction of the Cayman Islands and Cuba. Later that day it reaches Category 2 status. After passing Grand Cayman, the hurricane starts moving north-northwest.

A Florida impact starts to look imminent. Projections are predicting that a Tampa landfall is likely. The last hurricane to hit near Tampa was in 1921 and was unnamed at the time. With today's categorization, it would have been a Cat-3.

#

The same year as Charley, my family went down to see my grandmother in Homestead for Thanksgiving. From an overpass section of I-75, I could see houses with blue tarps for roofs,

others just a pile of rubble. Further south were patches of pre-fab homes—FEMA trailers set up after the storm. I just stared out the back-driver’s side window. It was different than seeing the uprooted trees in the news coverage, than hearing people’s accounts of the winds, than people’s accounts of all they had lost. And there I was, safe in my family’s van, stories above the destruction. Heading to my grandmother’s, who herself had survived Andrew in 92, along with her house. Everything felt so much closer.

It occurred to me Tampa was spared all this destruction, though Hurricane Frances that same year flooded out Tampa. It occurred to me that had Charley not turned right when he did, the government would have set up identical trailers somewhere in Tampa. My family probably still would have been secure in some regards living a good ten miles north of the Bay, but the areas my parents lived in before having children would have drowned. Life in the city would’ve come to a halt.

Years after the hurricane and my trip to my grandmother’s, in one of my gerontology classes in college, the teacher in a lecture on older homeless defined the homeless as anyone without a permanent legal address, which would include her father enjoying retirement traveling America in a mobile home. There were other parts to her definition, and she used technical language pulled from government sources, but I was struck by who could be counted as homeless when it came to research. That home could be quantified so easily and still miss the mark.

Riding past the FEMA trailers at sixteen in my middle, working-class world free of devastating hurricanes, it never occurred to me someone could have shelter but not a home. I knew the trailers were never meant to be permanent, but I didn’t realize what that meant.

#

_____ 2015

I step in a puddle near the train tracks on my way to my office in Memphis. Last night's storm poured inches and inches of rain as I sat on my nail-polished stained green coverlet and tried to read for class. The pools of water all around Memphis make me wish I would have collected some of the rain to water my avocado plant—named Iva. I have always loved how the rain makes everything the most perfect shade of green. But more how it lives on in the lives of others. The single molecule of water feeding my plant, may one day feed me.

My father used to collect the rain that poured off our roof in Tampa. He would line up empty Tide bottles under the slope of shingles leading up to the front door, the same place I kept my tadpoles. He had a mess of at least a dozen bottles underneath the bench outside the door and used them as needed when he worked in the yard. Later my parents invested in rain gutters, collecting the rain in giant barrels around our house to water plants with later. But it started with the empty Tide bottles, just like to the one I have sitting on the floor of my pantry in Memphis and it's nice to think the ways home still persist in new places and in new ways.

#

The summer after my first year of graduate school, I went back home to Tampa. I got swept up in the rolling hills on some state road in Alabama. The horizon blurred out at the top of the slope due to the sun and heat and I finally understood why cartoons always showed water mirages in deserts. For a single second, the road disappeared into water. It felt like I could drive off the end of the world. There surely wasn't anything beyond the hill. Then the new horizon would emerge, and seconds later there was a new place of the world for me to fall off of.

My time back in Florida that summer was strange and short-lived.

“We have had rain for about two weeks straight,” my father told me. “It’s not like our usual afternoon storm either. It’s just all-day rain.”

By the fourth day of August, Tampa had already surpassed the average rainfall for the entire month. My Tampa persons shared a meme of a cartoon drawing of Florida showing the center of the state—a strip from Tampa to Orlando—covered in water. It made South Florida look like an island. Meanwhile, my family in Homestead were stuck in a mini-drought.

Whenever I have talk about a Florida storm, I have bragged about the clockwork nature of the beast. How the thunderhead rolls in off the Gulf or the Bay in the afternoon. How it’s guaranteed to last no more than twenty minutes. How even when the storms were different, they were always the same.

But this freak weather pattern was just different. And I didn’t hate it. Even when the ponds and lakes overflowed and sent water in the sewers which sent water into the streets, trapping me in my home because I was afraid to drive the flooded streets in my tiny Corolla, I didn’t hate it. I didn’t need Tampa to be what it once was, because I wasn’t who I once was.

I set out to explore the reach of the flooding of the neighborhood on foot, which luckily didn’t seem to touch any of the houses. Near the sewers I noticed tiny tadpoles swimming in the brown waters. A few days later when I was bored again, I went to check on my friends I made on my last excursion.

The water was receding back into the sewers. There were fewer of the buddies I made before, though they were larger now, plump. But their perceived home was smaller. It reminded me of the El Niño in fifth grade that prompted me to try to keep tadpoles as pets. I recalled my fifth-grade self, watching her tadpole friends’ movements diminish day by day in the plastic cup, hoping one might make it to become something else. When they died, she wasn’t sure what to

do. It seemed cruel to dump them on the sidewalk leaving them to desiccate in the sun. It seemed meaner still to dump them in the yard where birds would feast on their dead bodies. Her solution to the problem was to walk the cup, a temporary coffin, to the end of the street and spill their bodies into the sewer.

I wondered what would happen to these new friends hanging around the gutters near the sewer. Ones carried to this spot by flood waters. What would happen when the waters receded? Would waters carry them back to the pond? Or would sewers take them to new places like currents pushed hurricanes towards homes?

#

August 21, 1992

Significant changes in the environment near the storm begin. The low-pressure system Andrew first encountered on the 17th splits. Half moves to the north. This reduces the vertical wind shear over the storm. The other half of the pressure system moves south enhancing “the upper-level outflow over the tropical storm.” Concurrently, a high-pressure system emerges near the southeast coast of the United States. With this, Andrew turns more westward moving at just under 20 miles per hour.

He begins to grow, finally, in strength.

#

Sometime, maybe around the El Niño of fifth grade, I waited at the bus stop, the place where water from the retention pond would flood sewers when I was an adult. Baby frogs about the size of a fingernail hopped across the street, in my memory, back toward the retention pond. This makes little sense, but this is what I remember. Perhaps even child me knew the destructive nature of irrational attachments. Maybe a third where squished by cars racing to morning jobs or

errands in the dim morning light. In school we learned some animals have so many babies because so few survive to maturity. To read about the concept in school was one thing, to see it practice was another.

Adult me has deeper questions here, however. Chiefly, if those fingernail- sized frogs weren't so desperate to get back to the pond, what might have happened to them?

#

When Hillsborough cancelled classes for that Friday, Charley was only a Cat-2, nothing to worry over. Students were treated to a three-day weekend less than a month into the school year. Fact: Floridians have hurricane parties for anything less than a Cat-3. But the news said Tampa would be the place of impact and people believed the news. Also fact: a Cat-2 coming up the mouth of the Bay was probably nothing to sneeze at. Even a light rain coupled with the storm surge could leave the south flooded and downtown inoperable. Still, I was unconcerned. If anything, I was secretly excited at the prospect of a hurricane *hitting* Tampa instead of just passing through. Anything to disrupt the quiet life of middle-class suburbia. Armed with the tedium of previous seasons and previous storms, even with Charley projected to hit Tampa, home never felt like something I could lose, so it was never anything I could imagine missing.

#

August 13, 2004

Early morning on the 13th, the eye of Charley passes over western Cuba as a Category-3 hurricane—a major storm. Storm surges reach 13 ft. The hurricane weakens as it enters the Straits of Florida and moves over the Dry Tortugas around noon UTC. After passing the islands, Charley encounters, “an unseasonably strong mid-tropospheric trough” in the Gulf of Mexico.

The pressure system pushes the storm north-northeastward, and Charley begins moving towards southwest Florida.

Early afternoon UTC, or about 9:00 am EST, the maximum winds of Charley are over 100 kt. By 12:00 EST, those winds increase to 125 kt. making Charley a category-4 storm. The eye continues to shrink as it moves towards Florida. Charley makes landfall in Florida in the early afternoon near Cayo Costa with winds at 130 kt. Not near Tampa as originally predicted. The eye passes over Punta Gorda an hour later, ravaging the town. The National Hurricane Center and the NOAA call the results for the town and neighboring Port Charlotte “devastating.”

Charley picks up speed as he passes over the central Florida Peninsula. Later that evening Charley moves through Orlando. Winds have dropped to 75 kt., but Charley retains his hurricane classification as he topples trees. He moves off coast around Daytona Beach about 10 pm EST.

Insured losses are measured at \$6.755 billion in Florida. Combined with insured damages in South Carolina and North Carolina where the storm would make a second US landfall, Charley caused over \$14 billion in damages, making it the second costliest hurricane at that time behind Andrew. Though it would fall later that year and in subsequent years to the sixth costliest hurricane on record.

#

Over ten years later, in a new city, one devoid of hurricanes and strong thunderstorms, I can't help but wonder what would have happened if Charley never arced. Forecasters kept predicting a landfall near Tampa. What undetectable current sent Charley on its fated path.

#

August 22-24, 1992

Andrew intensifies into a hurricane. It is the first hurricane in nearly two years to form from a wave off the coast of Africa. Though as years press on, this will grow more common. The eye of the storm emerges in the morning and continues to intensify. By the following evening, the span of thirty-six hours, the storm is a Category-4 Hurricane on the precipice of becoming a Category-5. Though reports ten years later in 2002 will show the storm at this time having windspeeds in the Cat-5 range. The central pressure of the storm continues to drop, lowering 72 mb in 36 hours, a change that qualifies as “rapid deepening.”

Andrew crosses Eleuthera Island at the north. Then Berry Island the following day. Slightly weakened, the strong hurricane continues west toward southeast Florida.

But the storm intensifies again over the Straits of Florida. In fact, satellite images suggest the storm continues to intensify slightly as it begins to pass over the Florida peninsula. As the NOAA reports, “The radar data indicated that the convection in the northern eyewall became enhanced with some strong convective elements rotating around the eyewall.”

The central pressure of the storm as it made landfall near Homestead Airforce Base was 922 mb as it ravaged the southern tip of Florida. The pressure had dropped almost 20 mb in the hours since crossing the Bahamas.

It took about four hours for the storm to cross the narrow tip of the Florida peninsula. It remained a major hurricane, the entire time causing storm surges between four and sixteen feet.

Andrew caused Florida an estimated \$25 billion in damages. He destroyed over 25,000 homes. Damaged another 100,000. In Dade County, Andrew destroyed ninety percent of mobile homes. In Homestead, the figure was closer to ninety-nine percent. Of the 1176 mobile homes in Homestead, only nine mobile homes survived the storm.

The NOAA describes Andrew as a compact system and says if the hurricane hit a little more north in Miami and Fort Lauderdale, the more populous areas in the region, the results to these areas “would have been catastrophic.”

It is hard not to project this language towards Charley, both hurricanes bypassing the larger cities to slam smaller towns.

#

_____ **2015**

I leave my retail job in Memphis closer to Sunday morning than Saturday night and when my wheels hit the highway this feeling comes over me, I can go anywhere. I want to turn around, take I-40 east to the Smoky Mountains, and wind myself around eroding rocks. Find my way to 75 and sink south until my lungs fill with the scent of sea. Or maybe just continue west and make like Balboa until I am at the Pacific. Head north until I am at some imaginary edge and disappear into an unknown country. Or maybe just drive until I figure out where I am going.

#

Over ten years after Charley and the city of Punta Gorda has blossomed. The hurricane that toppled trees also sent in a mess of people to help with the relief efforts. The same hurricane that damaged a city also allowed a path to a new identity, a new body. Some people stayed, others left. Some businesses closed. Others opened. And still the city was able to pick out glimmers of hope from a hurricane that was projected to hit Tampa, yet did not. I can't say what would have happened if the hurricane followed the models up the mouth of the Bay. I don't know if Tampa had anything to gain at the time or what would have been lost in imagined rebuilding efforts.

One restaurant owner in Punta who lost his restaurant to Charley in 2004 opened a new restaurant in 2013. Residents of Punta Gorda can now order their sushi with a spiciness rating

system of Category 1 to Category 5. They can gather on Sundays for brunch on the Hunker-Down Deck at a place called Hurricane Charley's and reminiscence on what used to be and plan for what is yet to come.

Language Negotiations

“When we lose a language, it is like dropping a bomb on the Louvre.”--Ken Hale

#

My mom was hovering off to the side as I looked at the overpriced glasses on the wall of my optometrist office. My former optometrist referred me to the eye doctor a few years earlier when I was in high school after he discovered an issue with my optic nerve and thought a specialist might benefit me. I liked the doctor and place enough, though I stuck out.

The new place catered to older adults and at sixteen, I was on average at least forty years younger than ninety percent of the patient population. In addition to most of the patients being older adults, the majority of them also happened to be Latinx or Hispanic. I often watched familial relationships played out in conversations I scarcely understood as I waited for vision techs to mispronounce my name—usually Breanna as if the “e” on the end has some magical properties to transform it into another sound, other times Bre-nnie or Bryn-ning, which I never understood.

The urge to look at glasses was half-felt. I suspected I wouldn’t find anything, and if I did they would be too expensive, but I also wanted to avoid the hassle of driving elsewhere. The woman who worked the retail space of the doctor’s office came over and asked if I needed any help. I smiled and said, “Just looking,” then turned back to the wall of lenses waiting to disappoint me. I heard it a few seconds later, the language of so many patients, a language my mom hasn’t spoken since she was ten but still manages to pick up bits and pieces of. Not enough to carry conversations, but enough to recognize a handful of words.

“Hola. Cómo estás?” the woman said, then all the other words were lost on me.

I turned to see a person trying to engage another in some sense of a shared culture, my mom looking for the break in words to go back to the one she knows. My mom's face remained neutral and when the woman finished my mom just laughed politely and said, "English is fine."

My mom never looks confused when this happens, though it happens more often than she wishes. She rarely looks put off or put out either, nodding patiently until the other person is done. This has become so normal to her that she forgets every time it happens, forgets that it often annoys her. She will usually just laugh and say, "English is fine." The other person will laugh along too. "You can never be sure," they say. I'm not sure if this is a comment on Florida or my mother's skin, or how they both coincide. While the middle conversation always differs—sometimes my mom explains her lack of knowledge of the language, other times she just accepts the other person's embarrassed apology—the ending is always the same: the recognition of either a mistaken or denied identity. The two people share only one language, not two.

In these scenarios, after the person has left or my mom has walked away, she will turn to me, or my father, or either one of my brothers and ask: "Do I really look *that* Spanish?" The answer has always been easy, at least for me. She has dark skin, dark hair, dark eyes. She is the picture of otherness, despite her lack of accent, in a in a state that seems desperate to forget its Spanish origins. She is, at a minimum, not white, and in a state like Florida, people will see her as some degree of Hispanic or Latino even if she doesn't feel it, even if she doesn't want to be, even if she doesn't speak the language.

#

Noel Ignatiev notes in *Before the Irish Were White* that white skin was not a pass for entry into the white race for the Irish immigrants living in America in the 18th and 19th centuries. Laws even denied the existence of the Irish Roman Catholic as a person. A 2009 *Belfast Telegraph*

article reported that traditionally Irish Catholic names like Patrick and Bridget fell out of fashion due to fear of discrimination. In current times, it is laughable to count the Irish as anything but white. Even St. Patrick's Day has become a commercialized holiday, a clear sign of acceptance.

But the story of the Irish's successful transition into whiteness is problematic as it was often at the expense of similarly-situated African Americans. The Irish may not have been culturally or socially white, but their skin gave them access to this world.

Whiteness for many Hispanic and Latinx people is similarly complicated. Over a third of U.S. Latinx people identify as mixed race. And of these, over forty percent count themselves as white and only thirteen percent volunteer more than one race when asked about racial ancestry. Twenty percent simply label themselves as Hispanic, though the US census does not count this as a race.

The personal essay, "White" by Harrison Candelaria Fletcher reflects on the whiteness present in Latinx identities. As a child, fellow students referred to Fletcher as a "honky" and said he was white, despite Candelaria being an ethnic name. In another section of the essay, he asks his mother about their heritage for a school report. Here he learns he is not Mexican, Chicano, or Irish. When pressed, his mother finally relents and says, "And if you want to know the truth, my family's Basque," a Spanish-French hybrid identity. The essay ends on a survey question asking the reader to mark their race where Hispanic or Latino is not an option but "White" or "Some other race" is.

#

My mother's story is best wrapped up in the sentence: She was primarily raised by two women who were not her mother, one of whom called her a half-breed, and this was still a better fit than if her mother was in the picture.

She spoke Spanish at some point, my mother did; can still pick up words here and there, enough so she got the gist when her mother made rude comments about the nursing staff when she—my grandmother—was in the hospital, comments the nursing staff understood because they were Dominican. But my mom’s mother considered herself as white, descended from white Europeans. She didn’t understand the Spanish Diaspora and colonization that lead to Afro-Latinx people, that lead to black people knowing Spanish, despite her marriage to a non-white Cuban. My maternal grandmother’s whiteness was a shawl she could wrap around herself. Her leg up, like the Irish, was othering the people of color around her. I can’t say why she didn’t stay married to my Cuban grandfather, but I do know she didn’t like it when my mother tanned. Also, that she was adamant about using the term “Castilian” to describe herself.

My mom cannot write Spanish and doesn’t speak it now unless she is ordering takeout from Pepo’s, our family’s favorite Spanish-Cuban restaurant in Tampa. I listen to her when I accompany her on these missions to pick up enough food to last at least two days. She rolls her r’s without thinking about it, and papas rellenas becomes a single word, almost esoteric to me, despite my love of the fried food. My attempts to say papas rellenas sound, for lack of a better word, White. I can’t roll my r’s without thinking. I don’t speak the language. My mom spent the first ten years of her life bi-lingual, translating for her grandmother who never learned English. The rest of her life was spent around people who didn’t speak Spanish, or did, but wouldn’t speak it to her. I want to ask her what it was like living in a Spanish neighborhood as a teenager surrounded by a language she was losing along the way, but I forget to ask in our conversation. On some level I have to admit some of my claims to identity are based in romanticism and nostalgia. Speaking Spanish was just not that important growing up.

My maternal grandfather was Cuban. My brothers and I never called him abuelo and he never asked us to. We always called him Julio, even though we knew he was our grandfather. He had a Shar Pei named Hop Sing. Julio was likely born in the United States, though according to my mother and the records she's been able to track down online, he traveled back and forth to Cuba before the country closed its borders. My mother isn't sure Julio is her father. She doesn't have a reason for this line of thinking, or if she does, she hasn't shared it with me. I asked my mom once about how her mother and Julio got married, since I know my mother has an older half-brother.

"Well she got knocked up and had to get married," she said while continuing to feed the outdoor cats.

"But what about your half-brother? What happened there? He's older than you."

"My mom got knocked up and had to get married," she said just as before. "Didn't love the man so they got divorced and she left both of them in California."

Given her own mother's proclivities, and the fact that her mother eventually divorced Julio and remarried (and was married before Julio), I could see why my mom may be doubtful of her lineage. If her mother called herself Castilian and if her grandmother referred to her as "half-breed," would it be simpler for my mom just to claim whiteness by denying paternal lineage? Would it abate the Spanish conversations that seem to drift her way if she could, like her mother, just say she was European?

My maternal grandmother immigrated to America when she was about eight. I met her when I was a pre-teen. The first words I ever heard her speak involved her saying she had a permit to carry a concealed weapon and wanted to make sure we were ok people when my mother, some other family members, and I showed up at her front door. She acted like our visit

was planned and she hadn't spent the last eleven-odd years in a state of silence with her only daughter. My mother's mother asked me and my brothers to call her abuela. I did so sardonically. I wasn't sure why she wanted to invoke some sense of Spanish-ness after denying my mother—and by transitive properties, me—the language, but it was never to be a culture we shared. And again, language did not seem important to my identity growing up, at least not enough to go learn it on my own. Mi abuela thought my name was Rianne, though my name, Breanne, is coincidentally Irish. She once showed me a picture of myself and asked who was in the picture. She was not a person to recognize connections. She never tried to teach me Spanish.

The main women in my mother's life were her great-grandmother, of whom she has fond memories and who said the family was Gypsies, and her grandmother, who perpetuated the idea that the family was Castilian and therefore pure Spanish White. These are the women who raised my mom and created her understanding of herself.

#

In October of 2017, the Catalan region of Spain, a semi-autonomous area bordering France, declared its independence from Spain. Kathryn Woolard, a Professor Emerita of anthropology at the University of California, San Diego, discusses the complex identities that form in this region in her article "Language, Identity, Politics in Catalonia." The area speaks to how language is important to identity. Though sixty-four percent of the population consider themselves native-born, almost seventy percent are descended from immigrants. Woolard notes that those who speak Catalan (as opposed to Spanish) are viewed as better leaders and more refined. Language is essential to shaping the regional culture. Castilian immigrants express a desire for their children to learn Catalan, a language that is a blend of French and Spanish, though linguistically distinct from both.

Identity in Catalonia seems to differ from other parts of Spain, too. Language is a marker of identity for those in Catalonia, with “A Catalan is a person who speaks Catalan” being a popular sentiment amongst the inhabitants of the region. Catalan language use is often associated with support for Catalan independence, further showing the importance language has to identity. Others in Catalan see birth origin being a marker of identity, so the children of immigrants born in the region are immediately Catalan. Other parts of Spain use jus sanguinis (right of blood) as a determiner of identity and thus citizenship. For Castilians in Spain, identity is a biological heritage.

#

When I think about my childhood, I don’t realize how it differed from my same aged-counterparts. My parents taught my brothers and me to count to ten in Spanish. I was perhaps seven. This is probably what my mom remembered of Spanish without having to do mental gymnastics to remember more. Any maybe, like me, she had a little nostalgia for her ancestry. I remember using and learning the numbers almost like a song: uno, dos, tres/ cuatro, cinco, seis/ siete, ocho, nueve, diez! I don’t remember using the numbers for anything in particular but they popped up enough for me to remember them in my first Spanish class in sixth grade, making the first week’s lesson easy. The counting always seemed natural to childhood and not at all related to cultural heritage or identity. My parents also unintentionally taught my brothers and me how to spell “toys.” This is how we would ask to how to visit the toy section at Walmart or Target. One of us would say “T-O-Y-S?” the letters going up in pitch in another sing-songy manner, and our parents would either relent or not. I did not attach the counting to heritage, there wasn’t much of either numbers or lineage to do so. I also learned to say callate la boca, probably from my mom. Given what I know of “mi abuela” and her mother, I imagine my mother heard this

often, though she never used it in anger on my brothers or me. I wonder if this is a reason my mother tends to distance herself from her Spanish-ness.

#

My mother's name is Vivian. She sometimes notes that, in Spanish, it's pronounced Bi-bi-an. Her middle name, her Confirmation name, is Victoria. We both agree it doesn't suit her.

Her stepfather was in the military. This is the third man mi abuela wed. The first she wed without first conceiving a child. My mother traveled a lot when she was young, being an army brat. Few places had any Hispanic or Hispanic-adjacent heritage. My mother first learned English in Lake Charles, Louisiana, from the Black women who took care of her. This place, too, feels important to me. I almost applied to graduate school in this area. I've met a professor from McNeese State. He was a visiting writer at my school in Memphis. Lake Charles feels like a point that can connect us, though I've never been.

It was the early 50s and mi abuela wasn't around much. My mother spent most of her days with two Black women with heavy Cajun accents—Lucy and her niece Judy. This often meant she stayed at Lucy and Judy's house instead of her own. My mother says she learned to say “ask” as “axe” which drove her stepfather crazy. I'm not sure if it's telling she doesn't mention her mom when she tells me this.

My mom can tell me exactly three other things about her life in Louisiana. One. Her half-brother came to visit one summer. He went fishing and caught a turtle. When he brought the turtle home, Judy took it back to her place and my mom, who was no more than six, was convinced she was going to cook it and make soup. Two. Her grandmother, the one who called her a half-breed, once slapped her from drinking out of the black people's water fountain. Three. Despite the previous story, my mother doesn't remember racism during this time. Or maybe she

only means racism leveled at herself. She says she was usually on the base when she was not with Lucy or Judy and says living on the base democratized a lot of race issues. “The military was a family,” my mother said, “It didn’t matter if you were black or white. You stuck together.”

#

A few years into my retail job in Tampa, a customer came to my department looking for a pair of shoes. He was maybe six foot, three hundred pounds, round with dark skin and dark hair. His entire being was just one big jovial smile. I don’t remember how our conversation started, only he shared mutterings with his friend in Spanish before I came over to assist him. He must have said something to me in Spanish because soon I was having to explain, yes I was Spanish, my mom is Spanish and Cuban, no I don’t speak the language.

“Why not?” he asked.

It doesn’t matter how many times I get asked this, and it doesn’t matter how many times I respond, my answer always feels weak: “My mom didn’t speak it growing up, so I didn’t either.” It requires a longer, complicated history. My grandfather is Cuban. He wasn’t around. Mi abuela is Spanish. She also wasn’t around. Mi abuela is also racist, could find a foothold in America by claiming Whiteness via her European Spanish roots. She is Spanish in a white sense. My mother is also Spanish, but her Cuban-ness denies her the whiteness she sometimes feels. I have yet to learn how to distill these complications into small talk. I’ve made little sense of them myself in longer ruminations.

A shorter, perhaps truer, answer is I never thought to teach myself, a reflection of the importance I placed on learning Spanish.

Years after the retail incident, I was back home visiting family. I’d been going to school in Memphis the past year and half and finding myself missing many of the parts of Florida I

never saw as distinctly Florida until I wasn't there. Plantain chips—Chifles specially—were impossible to find. So was my favorite brand for spices—Badia. I never found a Spanish restaurant around me in Memphis and had to make at least four pounds of roast pork anytime I got a craving for Cuban food. At brunch, I couldn't order café con leche. Cubans were not on any of the deli menus, not that I would order them anyway. I hate mustard and pickles. What I thought was Hispanic, I never thought of as also being Florida.

My parents wanted to take a day to visit my brother who was living in Orlando. As a last stop in our visit, we decided to go to one of the outlet malls. Checking out at Victoria Secret—a store that had at least twelve cashiers on register and just as many associates walking the floor to assist the customers, but still had a ratio of at least ten customers per associate—the woman began talking to me in a language I couldn't recognize over the noise. She had dark skin and long black hair. Noticing my confusion, a look my mother never wore in these situations, she switched to another language then another. Finally, I just said “English is fine.” My tone suggested an annoyance I didn't intend it to.

When I walked out of the store, I found my family and joking said, “Apparently, I'm Spanish in Orlando.” I secretly like it when people speak Spanish to me, though the language barrier causes me anxiety every time. It validates my connection to a Latinx identity if only for a moment, and I don't have to explain what I am, or what I feel I am. I then recounted my story to my family. My brother said, “Everyone is Spanish in Orlando. That or Brazilian.”

#

According to *National Geographic*, approximately 10,000 languages have been spoken or written since the beginning of language. Only about 6,000 are still spoken today. Of this number,

more than half will disappear in the next century. Amongst the languages in danger of going extinct is Irish.

Ireland complicates the idea of language and identity. A 2004 survey in the country found almost ninety percent thought that Irish language was important to the country, while just over half of the survey population thought it was “personally” important. This number was cut further when asked if the participant thought speaking Irish was important to being Irish in a 2003 International Societal Survey. Even as the country pushes students to learn Irish and the country strives to become bilingual—speaking English and Irish—most do not see the value of Irish speaking outside of the classroom. It is not important to their Irish identity. As Iarfhlaith Watson notes in his 2008 article “Irish language and Identity” Irish language is largely of *symbolic importance*.

#

The timeline for my mother gets confusing after she left Louisiana. She says she moved when she was about ten, but also says she it was about third or fourth grade when she was in school in Indiana. She remembers one year she went to three different schools and mostly lived on farms. Around seventh grade she went to Catholic school in Logansport Indiana where, as my mother says, “the Catholics were White,” something I take to mean was new for her.

My mother says she was in Indiana during the Cuban Missile Crisis. I forget my mom was Cuban during the Cuban Missile Crisis, that she lives in a brown body and has all her life. She doesn’t have much to say about this except her grandmother wasn’t worried. “They have missiles that can reach 3000 miles. Florida is only 90 miles away,” her grandmother said. I gather she didn’t follow the family to Indiana, but with all the moving my mom did, often to white spaces, it’s hard to say.

From Indiana, her family moved to Sault St. Marie, Michigan. She told me about living there when I was younger. In elementary, I once wrote a story about a family on a school bus driving past the border into Canada. I also wrote about swimming in the Great Lakes. It seemed like a place begging persons to cross divides, yet still assumed a white identity.

Sault St. Marie had a single road in town and residents would often drive into Canada. When she was there, the town had just gotten a Woolworth's department store. People would go to an office-type building and order clothes from a catalogue. "You could also order by phone," My mother informs me. Like Indiana, she has little to say except "Even at Mackinac Island, the tourists were white."

#

In my MFA program in Memphis I once overheard a fellow creative writer say, "We don't have Hispanic writers here, really." She was having a larger conversation with another writer about issues of diversity within our English department. We had exactly one black student on our editorial staff of our lit journal and only a handful more in the graduate program. I imagine this is a problem with many departments at many universities, not one specific to our institution. The issue is only magnified in a city like Memphis where being white makes you the racial minority.

I don't disagree with the student's sentiment of diversity. I'm by nature a curious person. I'm also nosy. I want to hear people's stories. I want a variety of stories. I love different perspectives. What bothers me is this narrow definition of diversity. What bothers me is diversity for diversity's sake. That's what the statement implied to me: Our department doesn't have a Hispanic student; if we did have one, we could be even more diverse, and therefore better. Also, that I was not Hispanic.

Hispanic clearly meant something to this one student and I didn't meet the parameters. Our department also lacks Asian writers and Native writers, but these weren't mentioned. Nor was the fact our department also has queer writers and a disabled writer. Or that our department also has older writers with kids and grandkids. I didn't understand the fellow student's call for Hispanic writers or what this even entailed. If food is indicative of culture, I can tell you that Mexico and South America are about as similar to islands in the Caribbean as White Southerners are to White Alaskans. "Hispanic" grocery aisles in Memphis are, more often than not, Latin American grocery aisles. It is only within the few months I can find liquid mojo at grocery stores in Memphis and I still can't find decent plantain chips.

Variations exist in identity and Hispanic can mean many things. I know why I didn't speak up, say I'm a Hispanic writer, say my mother is Cuban and Spanish, say at least one of my grandparents is an émigré, probably both. Hispanic is not an identity I feel I can claim while wearing the privilege of white skin. Hispanic is not an identity I can claim when I still don't know the language. Hispanic is an identity hard to claim outside of Florida where populations are smaller and more delineated. I also know what the other student was trying to say, "We don't have writers writing about the Hispanic experience," and on that, they were right.

#

My mother returned to Tampa briefly after Michigan, the city in which she was born, but eventually moved to Charleston, South Carolina after it became hard to live on her own. This was about late 60s early 70s and this is where she says she first experienced racism. She would have been late teens or early twenties. She remembers desegregation still being an issue.

"In South Carolina, you were either "White or Black" my mother says.

She worked at J.M. Fields—a department store originally based out of Massachusetts. At the time, she wore a St. Barbara medallion and a black hand charm associated with what she calls “Hispanic voodoo.” From what I can tell, she is referencing a mano de azabache, a charm given to Hispanic children for protection. “White people didn’t like the medallion. They didn’t like the hands,” she tells me. She thinks the assistant manager didn’t like that my mother was comfortable talking to black people and that the mano de azabache was associated with black power. She wasn’t allowed to wear the medallion at work. She said she tucked the necklace into her shirt underneath her bra so no one could see it and so it wouldn’t fall out. I think of the irony of hiding one aspect of identity while wearing another for all to see.

I don’t know how my mother’s brown body fit into the dichotomy of South Carolina’s racial structure, though I know she wasn’t white, and must have felt this too. Even if she tried to hide her hands, they would always be visible.

#

I recently watched a TedTalk about how language shapes the way we think. The speaker mentioned a culture that only used cardinal directions to orient themselves in spaces. This went beyond merely “Head west for three lights and then turn north.” The culture mentioned in the video would also say “There is something on the northwest corner of your face.” This use of cardinal directions was so strong it also affected their relationship with time. If asked to arrange pictures of a person chronologically by age, the placement of the pictures changed with the direction the person was facing. Facing one direction time could move linearly left to right. Facing another direction, time could move towards or away from the body. The use are cardinal directions—the language of cardinal directions—meant this culture was more attuned to the earth directionally than thought possible.

Wenying Jiang, Chinese Discipline Coordinator at The University of Queensland, further highlights the relationship between language and culture. Participants—Native English speakers and Native Chinese speakers were asked to perform word associations. For flavors, English speakers would note ethnic foods, like Chinese, Italian, Thai. Chinese speakers offered up terms like fast-food and “green food.” Jiang notes, language not only reflects culture but helps shape and is shaped by it. In her article, “The Relationship between Culture and Language” Jiang offer the metaphor of language and culture being like flesh and blood: “Without culture, language would be dead; with language culture would have no shape.”

I don’t know what it means that my mom refers to *mano de azabache* as Hispanic voodoo, but I can venture a guess as to why I was not offered my own bracelet as a child—this was not a culture that was important to her. She didn’t even know the language.

#

My mother has more stories about her life in Tampa than almost anywhere else. Her great-grandmother would read Tarot and palms. I thought of this when I read *The House on Mango Street* when I was in ninth grade, again feeling a lost connection. She remembers living in apartments—in Tampa it was always apartments—with large wooden front doors and windows at the top. All the stores in the neighborhood were small and run by Hispanics. She would walk to the corner and buy a half gallon of milk from a vending machine for fifty cents. At some point my mother acted as translator for her grandmother and great-grandmother, though this eventually stopped.

Her grandmother never learned English, a trend common among first generation immigrants. She shopped for the full week from Demie’s Grocery store loading up on palomilla, beef stew, and ground beef. She would purchase a live chicken, and the workers would kill it

there, chopping of its head and plucking its feathers before loading into a bag for my mother's grandmother. Vegetables came fresh from trucks. Nothing was ever pre-packaged. My mother's grandmother also had a live-in boyfriend, whom she never married, named Frankie Napoli. He ran an illegal game of bolita at a bar known for its Black clientele. Frankie would count the money at the house where my mother lived. She stared at the coins as he counted them off, sometimes he would give her some.

Raymond J. Schnieder suggests in "Tampa: Tale of Two Cities" that romanticized ideas of a racially integrated and harmonious Ybor are somewhat accurate. That old Ybor saw a mix of Spanish, Italian, Cuban, and Afro-Cuban people living and working in the same area without undue conflict.

My mother went to the Columbia Restaurant every week with her uncle and ordered a piece of pound cake and a coke. Other times they went to the Silver Ring Café, a place famous for its deviled crab and Cuban sandwiches. Only one of these places is still around.

Her mother, armed only with an eighth-grade education, rolled cigars in one of the factories in Ybor. This was the work women could expect at the time. This was the work of immigrants and people of color.

#

Another fellow graduate student in Memphis asks me if I ever say I'm Hispanic when filling out applications and whatnot. I'm third generation Spanish, maybe fourth generation Cuban. I can trace my heritage along clean lines. My mother spoke Spanish until she was ten. My familial house in Tampa is filled occasionally with the aroma of Spanish and Cuban food. I feel I should be able to claim a Hispanic identity.

We still go down to the local butcher for special events and order a boliche, an eye-of-round beef roast stuffed with chorizo. My mother makes it like beef stew adding in carrots and potatoes and onions all at the perfect time with extra broth. My family eats this over rice. I use the broth like a gravy spooning it over mashed potatoes. My mom and I test the flavor with a piece of Cuban bread we rip straight from the loaf. This could be Thanksgiving dinner. Other times my mother makes roast pork and a giant pork loin sits in our refrigerator overnight marinating in mojo. Cumin always smells just a little bit musty to me, but I always added a healthy amount to the orange juice when I make this myself in Memphis. Aroz con pollo is always just yellow rice and chicken. My mother never used the Spanish name here. This aspect of her identity has been negotiated. It never occurred to me that other families didn't make yellow rice and chicken, that this was something peculiar to my own childhood growing up amongst Non-Hispanic friends.

I'm not sure what I am allowed to claim. My mother is Cuban and Spanish. She raised us with the few foods she learned to make in a mostly white culture. What she couldn't make, we would order from Pepo's and feast on for days. My mom refuses to try to make papas rellenas because "they're too complicated and messy." They probably wouldn't be as good as Pepo's anyway, another negotiation.

"Sometimes," I say to the question of claiming Hispanic-ness. It's the truth. I've shied away from claiming the identity as I've grown up because I've led a mostly privileged life. I remember how mad I was when a wealthyish, white presenting student won a scholarship for Hispanic students and I thought *you are the person this scholarship is intended to help. I'm not who this scholarship is intended to help.* I'm afraid of misappropriating my Spanish-ness or Cuban-ness for personal gain, especially when I don't speak the language. Still, I want to say *yes*

I am Cuban, yes I am Spanish. All this coalesces and conflicts to create a hybrid identity I love while not understanding.

The other student wants to claim Hispanic identity too because he thinks his whiteness excludes him, puts him at a disadvantage professionally. He once mentioned his friend couldn't get into medical school because "he was white." He also says no one will hire him after graduation because he is "a white male and not a marginalized person." He tells me his mom's maiden name is Fernandez, that he must be Hispanic.

How does one respond in this situation? Who gets to claim identity? Does there need to be proof? Can identity be measured in degrees? Genes? His claim to a Hispanic identity on such tenuous terms makes me feel gross, but I also question if my claim is any better.

#

I ask my mom her feelings on being White, and she says she is proud to be Spanish and Cuban and I want to believe her. But then she says her own mother forbid her from going out in the sun or from tanning because she didn't want my mother to become too dark. My mother says she felt like an outsider in her own family. She notes her grandmother was adamant about the notion that the family was Castilian and white but says "We are gypsies". My mother wasn't that light," a notion handed down from her great-grandmother. I don't know why my mother thinks she is Romani beyond her great-grandmother's claim. A fair number did migrate to Spain, but linguistically speaking, Roma people have roots in India. Still, in another breath when someone talks to her in Spanish she asks, "Am I really that dark?" My mother may have grown up in White America racially speaking—at least by how we as a society continue to define race—but she will never be fully white, no matter her acculturation. Our obsession with labels and appearance will perpetuate her otherness.

I ask my mother her feelings on being Hispanic. She says her mother didn't speak Spanish to her past the age of ten because she thought her mom was embarrassed. She laments not being able to speak Spanish and feels she has lost a connection to people of her culture. My mother questions where she comes from since she is darker than her family. She asks what kind of Spanish she is.

What kind of Cuban.

I press her about her reaction to people speaking Spanish to her and her reaction of asking the closest person around if she looks Spanish. She concedes that she looks Hispanic, though this is not what I want. I realize my mother is just as confused about her identity as I am about mine, even as she works to be proud of it.

The confusion about race is understandable. Her mother was hardly around. She grew up in Louisiana in a predominantly black culture. She grew up in Indiana and Michigan where people were mostly white. She spent time in Tampa where Spanish was paramount, yet eventually she didn't speak the language. She lived in a brown body in a state that insisted on a Black and White dichotomy. She was the only Cuban in her household. Even in her family she was an "other."

I want race and culture and identity to be both a situation where you say "English is fine," while still hoping to understand a language that feels like it should be a part of me but sadly never is. I want to keep negotiating my claims until they make sense to me and my family. I want to find a term aside from White Hispanic. Or perhaps for race to just not be a thing.

Navigating Romantic Relationships

To my left the water is a beautiful gray-blue, and the currents make the river below look like an oil painting. To my right the river slides itself along the retaining wall and only looks green and muddy. I have found myself on this covered balcony of the Tampa Convention Center, where the Hillsborough River empties itself into the Tampa Bay in downtown, needing a moment away from a large academic conference. Here, the sun leaves pinpricks of silver on the water, disappearing the second they emerge, and I can forget for a moment a semester's worth of disappointments—not making Managing Editor, graduation seemingly nowhere in sight, and friends consumed with the university's literary journal leaving me physically and emotionally alone. The smell from the bistro inside the convention center drifts across the large balcony where people sit eating or writing, a few conversing about panels and other writers. When people open the doors to the convention center, the odor of charbroiled burger hits me. I immediately feel nauseated. When I name this nausea, I want to cry.

That's a lie. I've wanted to cry for a while now. From the second my travel companions left me to set up the table for the book fair this morning for a journal I have fallen out of love with. From the second one friend didn't respond when I said "I went off to find a corner," after she asked where I was. From the second I went to my first panel alone. Then searched for food alone. Then walked around alone. Actually, long before this trip even started when conversations started to abound about who would be manning the table at what time and who was next in line for managing editor, and I felt like an outsider, and people were making all these plans for a conference in my home town, and all my own plans that once seemed like a dream, like releasing my own journal in my hometown, disappeared, and I had to bite down on the bitterness that is jealousy and resentment to be a good friend or roommate.

Soon a second sickness emerges, replaces the nausea, and tears gloss my eyes until they are heavy enough to emerge from the bottoms of my oversized sunglasses. All my friends are busy, I didn't get the job I wanted, and I saw Maggie yesterday, which was really fucking weird.

But I don't want to think about Maggie and it's irrational to resent friends for successes they've earned, that have pulled them into the business inside the convention center and left me alone all day, so I divert my attention to the collection of palm trees in front of me, tall spindly types almost three stories tall. I remember once seeing similar palms bend almost seventy degrees in a bad storm that swept over Tampa Bay when my family was at a hotel on St. Pete Beach. The ones in front of me now have a thatch of dead fronds they have yet to shed.

#

People only understand heartbreak as it pertains to romance and I have yet to decide what I feel about this. In some ways it is understandable. Someone told me recently childhood friends are "our first romantic relationships." This was the second time my writing about Maggie had spurred questions in the realm of romance. The first time was questioning the platonic nature of the relationship. The person told me, "I just don't see why you would care this much about a person if it wasn't a relationship bending towards romance." Of course, what this person meant was sexual; she thought my love of Maggie was not platonic love, not even romantic love, but sexual love. But the relationship that left me crying on the balcony in Tampa was a journal, not a sexual love.

Other people have called the relationship with Maggie strange and weird, and I can't argue with this language, mostly from sheer exhaustion. They say they don't understand. And I can't find the words to say the pain of realizing you don't matter to someone who once mattered so much to you. How it is hard to move on when the language to define the relationship doesn't

exist. It is easy to name people when sexual-romantic relationships end. We've whittled it down to two whole letters—ex. I don't know how to describe Maggie. Do I say my best-friend, best-friend-broke-up with me? This feels too wordy and people are already confused. Why do people insist it is “weird” or “strange” that someone who was a major player in my life for over fifteen years broke my heart? Why cannot I take time and space to work some of this shit out?

And it is hard not to separate this from my current professional predicament—the loving someone who doesn't love you back. When the Editor in Chief called me into her office last semester to discuss the previous offer of a position I didn't want, she made a passing comment about “bad relationships.” The words at the time made me so angry I again wanted to cry. In trying to explain to friends why I can't be around the journal, that I need my distance, I've called this relationship “emotionally abusive.” The insistence that I should give something of myself when the journal won't give me what I want in return. In trying to explain all of this to my roommate, who also happens to be Managing Editor, I told her “Imagine all of your friends loving your ex who kind of fucked you over.” It's isolating, which makes the emotions compound. You can't complain about your ex to people who love your ex. They just won't get it.

The more I think about my feelings for Maggie, the journal, and other close friends for that matter, the less I resist the moniker of romantic. Dictionary.com offers us: “Fanciful; impractical; unrealistic.” I appreciate this far more than the sexual undertones people insist on attaching to notions of love.

So many immature relations fall into the realm of fanciful, unrealistic. Expecting Maggie and me to grow along parallel lines in infinitude. To last unchanged through adulthood. Older adulthood. Our brains aren't even fully developed until age twenty-five, the age the best-friend

broke up with me. Sex may be linked to desire. But romance and impracticality are born of childlike desires—the what we want versus what is real and tangible.

When I was passed over for Managing Editor the first time, that was it for me in the journal, even as I tried to convince myself otherwise. Wanting to come back to like I wasn't MIA the semester before and release a journal in my hometown? That was never meant to be. Seeing Maggie yesterday and pointing her out to my roommate who road tripped this conference with me and expecting something other than nothing? Sometimes relationships end without ever ending.

#

Moments later and I am no longer crying as the fronds sway in the breeze. The headache behind my eyes and the nausea from the café persist, however; a low, dull pain that wraps around my head like a vice. The dinghy, yellow as a school bus, traces itself though the water two stories below where I sit, leaving brush strokes in the forms of wakes that disappear after a few seconds. A blip in the course of a lifetime that lingers long after its death. I look at my laptop and jot down a few notes in hopes that I may later work out my emotions. Maggie, Lena, and I spent hours in this area—walking the river, playing in the park at midnight, waiting as the city dyed the river green for St. Paddy's—but no one is here now. I'm all alone.

When I look up again the dinghy has left sinuous bends in the diamond-dotted water. I press my fingers, cold from the shade and breeze, to my closed eyes and my tiredness is pushed away, if only for a second. If only for a second, my headache retreats and I don't feel so shitty. I reopen my eyes and the dingy is too far away for me to see its new wake and too long gone for me to see the old.

#

In college, I had to take the Meyer-Briggs test for a career development class. As with almost every other person I've encountered that's in a writing program, I'm an INFJ.

I'd like to think parts of the assessment are true, but this may just be confirmation bias, and my cynical side resists the easy answers in these personality tests. Parts I can say are true, for me at least, are that I take a while to open up, but when I do, I can come off as an entirely different person. This is a reason I value the relationships I do cultivate and try to cling to them. That I reach a point in relationships where I feel there is no going forward, a phenomenon the internet refers to as the "INFJ door slam." That I communicate better via writing than I do talking.

When I tried to define romantic, at least from my point-of-view, to my asexual roommate, I told her that it was hard to not attach sexual connotations to the word, even though I don't equate love and sex myself. Even though I know it is wrong, I've been conditioned to think of love in either the platonic or romantic paradigm, and even the well-intentioned do the same. Rebecca Traister attempts to work out the importance of female friendships in her 2016 op-ed "What Women Find in Friends That They May Not Get From Love," published in *The New York Times*. She argues that female friendships have been historically important, as they offered women support and companionship in times when marriages were not necessarily based on love, and thus may have left women unfulfilled. Women came in to fill the emotional and social gaps loveless husbands could not. Still, while she attempts to express the importance such relationships women offer other women, she separates "romantic love" and "friendship." Even the title of her argument is problematic as if it is impossible to feel love for friends.

As I work my own thoughts out on the page, the conditioning of media draws into sharp focus my inability to always articulate what it is I'm thinking. We don't have the language in our

culture to show the love that I felt for Maggie, that is still somewhat there. The love I had for the lit journal I no longer work for. The Greeks offer seven types of love, amongst them “Philia”—the love we have for family and friends. Affectionate love! For the ancient Greeks, Philia would have been commensurate with “Eros”—the desirous love we think of when we think of romance, the love of the body. That is, Philia was equally important to Eros. The Ancient Greeks were actually leery of sexual, desirous love because of its intensity, because of its irrationality.

Dictionary.com offers, “Ardent; passionate; fervent,” when I type in romantic trying to figure out why I am mad at friends for unintentionally leaving me alone, choosing, as I see it the journal over me. While I still am writing about Maggie.

#

My cold fingers find rest again on my eyes as I try to push back my headache while I continue to watch the waters of the Tampa Bay, palms bending in the wind. I want to form the thoughts to explain to my friend and her text asking why I left in a huff earlier. To say, “I resent you for taking that position. It should have been mine,” seems unfair to say even if it’s how I feel. To say, “I was left alone today” also feels unfair even though it’s the truth.

I scan the water for the school-bus-yellow boat and see nothing. No wake, no dinghy. The palms sway in the wind, and I am officially too cold to stay outside any longer, on this covered balcony that is feeling more like a cave. Goosebumps prickle near my elbows despite my cardigan and jacket. I break, unlike the palms, and turn to go inside.

Inside the convention center I thumb the conference program hoping to find a panel of interest. To sit inside and write leaves me helplessly exposed. And, again, alone. At least outside, I could stare at the water like some meditative practice. A panel on female friendships catches my eye. But this is across the street and I don’t feel like walking. It’s also started at 3:00, and it’s

already 3:10, and it mostly deals with young adult literature as if the importance of these relationships ends as soon as we exit young adulthood and find Eros. It occurs to me for perhaps the hundredth time: writers don't explore the complexities of female friendships nearly enough. And even when they do, they sometimes miss the mark. Women statically outlive men, which means women's friendships with other women may be some of the longest relationships in their lifetime outside of family relationships. Perhaps people think my complex relationships with Maggie is "weird" because we don't see enough relationships like these in media beyond shows on networks like Disney and Nickelodeon. We relegate these relationships to something existing only in girlhood because Eros is the end goal.

A few pages later I see a panel on the blending of science in essay writing and poetry. When I first walk in, a man with long gray hair pulled back in a ponytail is reading about an icy terrain. The next reader, a woman and poet, notes before she begins her reading that all the writers on the panel are writers and not scientists. I lose her comments about "interest in science" in the headache that still persists, my fingers no longer cold enough to push the pain back. She talks quarks and light and luminosity as I search my bag for a pen.

#

The English language seems a bit lazy or perhaps people are just lazy in their application. Or maybe I'm just romanticizing other languages. I was watching a German language show on Netflix recently and came across an article that talked about the difficulty in effectively dubbing such material. German will compound multiple concepts into a single word. This single word can have multiple translations based on context. This complexity of language makes it hard to translate for an English audience.

For example, Weltschmerz is a compound of the German word for world (welt) and pain (schmerz). While it's easy to simply translate weltschmerz as "world-pain" or "world-weariness," a better translation would be a sadness brought on by the workings of the world. Better yet, the disappointment brought on based on how the world actual works versus what we wished/want it to be. Dictionary.com offers sentimental pessimism as a definition, which is a word order that makes me smile. A synonym for sentimental? Romantic.

#

The second day of the convention I abandon the cave of the balcony and find a place in the sun by the water. Everything is quiet with only the white noise of passing conversations and the buzz of a small plane flying over the hotels on the bay. The din of the convention is trapped behind glass doors where the introverts haven't yet gathered enough to cause the exhaustion that is inevitable in these types of situations.

Today, I've already felt resentment enough times to forget all the resentments I felt yesterday and it is still early morning. Slow moving bodies that leave me dependent and pressed for time. "We're going to have to see your family early so we can see my family," my roommate tells me as if my thoughts on the matter don't matter. "I'll take your shift so you can go get coffee." This last one leaves me alone writing on the bay trying to bite down on the lemons my mouth usually forms. The friend's offer to help I read as condescending. I am trying to channel and filter my emotions, to be less impractical and more realistic, to temper my tendency towards romanticism. I can better express these emotions via writing than speaking so I try to put everything down before it is gone.

The day is perfect for outdoor activity. A strange coolness that seems to haunt any spring break I dare have in Florida mitigates the sun that stands, a blinding force, above the palms that

caught my attention yesterday. But all of my plans are indoors today. Networking to set up a panel for next year's convention. Walking rows and rows of booths and tables to meet people I may ask to help with the panel. An introvert's nightmare.

The friend from yesterday, the one that offered to take my shift so I could get coffee, that I felt left me all alone, the one that has the job I wanted, has agreed to be my wingman. She is a friendly introvert whereas I am the complex, shy but outgoing introvert. You give me an in, and I won't shut up, but it's unlikely I'll make that inroad myself. I try to keep this in mind when inside and I feel a slight, so slight, having to wait a few extra minutes to do the thing I want, that I end up crying in the bathroom. The irrational part of me, the romantic part, feels like my roommate is choosing the journal over me. And it's not so much the friend but what her position here at the convention represents—I didn't get the job I wanted, and she got it even though she didn't want it. Weltschmerz—the pain from the mismatch of desire and reality.

When I found out this writing convention was to be in my hometown, it solidified my desire to be managing editor, to release my journal in my hometown. But it didn't come to pass, and now I feel left grappling with two dysfunctional relationships—Maggie and the journal—when so many around me still seem to harbor positive feelings for entities that left me feeling like I never mattered to them.

It's hard to navigate spaces when emotions are real but also irrational. Fully felt but with the underpinnings of "I know I'm taking this too personally." What we feel is often more intense than what the moment calls for, but it doesn't mean the emotions aren't there, that they don't deserve to be validated.

#

Writers of the romantic period often utilized the concept of *weltschmerz* in their writing. Frederick C. Beiser defines the *weltschmerz* as “a mood of weariness or sadness about life arising from the acute awareness of evil and suffering.” Writers of the Romantic period glorified the past. They focused on emotions, celebrated nature, and rejected rationalism from the Enlightenment period. The writers of this time argued for the full expression of emotional extremes often emphasizing grief in their works. These writers thought logic alone could not answer all of life’s questions.

I think back to almost two years ago to the summer of 2016 when two professors left my program, my mom had breast cancer, and I received an email stating *I ultimately decided to work with* and my name didn’t follow. And how just a few months after that email I was downgraded from Senior Online Editor to just Online Editor because the new Editor in Chief didn’t like hierarchies. And all my work the pervious semesters seemed to dematerialize. And the next year and a half I watched multiple friends assume the role I wanted so bad, so bad I cried when I reread the email years later. And everyone seems to love this entity that left me feeling small and shattered while I had to feel, by myself, this overwhelming sadness and anger, from the disconnect of what I wanted to happen and the reality of the situation—*Weltschmerz*.

#

Day three of the convention and people wear tired faces behind cups of coffee that will probably never kick in. I spend the better part of the morning helping sell journals for a publication that I have fallen out of love with and can best be described as a quasi-abusive relationship. This is an act of kindness. Rational and Irrational. A friend who is fading needs food or sun or something after she asks, “Does it feel like the ground is shaking?”

When there is a moment, I sneak outside to write. The water smells salty for the first time since I've been here—the bay fighting back the river. The sun glows behind a cloud filled sky. There is no heat as there was yesterday when our group of friends sat outside for lunch, where I forgot my weltenschmerz for this trip. Water ripples, the current obvious, as I stare at the river that feeds into the bay.

Far off to the left the yellow river taxi I worried over two days ago ferries tourist around the river. From this level and distance, I can no longer see the wake it leaves behind, the paths it has traveled. This issue of perspective will always interest me. What is there, what we see, what we believe. What we know to be true, what we tell ourselves is truth.

Currents lap at docks and walls. The low hum of a different tour boat lulls me into a sense of deeper peace. Seagulls and corvids squawk in languages I wish I understood.

Migration Patterns of Clouds

I read today a typical cloud weighs about 1.1 million pounds. This feels important and I can't explain why. I want to lose myself in the rhythmic patter of drops falling. Sometimes the hard *thunk* of earth. Or the light *ring* of the metal van parked next door. I want to forget the stacks of essay I need to grade, or writings in the lit journal queue, the fact that my dinners lately have been microwave popcorn. That my current roommate is moving back to Florida and I need to find a new place to live

I keep looking out my window to find the source of my worries. To find what is causing this strange noise that has pushed me past exhaustion, out of bed, to this point. Right here. Rain on something I can't place, the thought of the weight of clouds. The urge to cry. My inability to do so.

#

My first time flying, I was one-month shy of my twenty-first birthday. I am afraid this says something about me. The way I remain attached to place. Maggie and I were going to see April, a friend who had lived in more cities than I'd visited.

Maggie asked the flight attendant for our "wings" as if the cheap plastic could lead us elsewhere. As if the token could say something about who we were. I imagine the trip felt important enough to keep the pin, silver and molded into the wings of a bird. Though I can't prove this now with me here in Memphis. If I did keep them, they aren't something I carry with me. At least, I'm not attached to them.

She must have thought I was scared. "It's just like a roller coaster," I said to cut the silence when the plane dipped in the sky. Not really turbulence as my stomach fell and rose with the plane, my body an extension of either sky or metal. Maggie's face screwed up into a smile

that said, "It's ok to be scared" while simultaneously saying, "I'm definitely not." Or maybe history has colored this moment unlike the silver plastic. It felt poignant to share this experience with her in ways that return to me. Over and over. How do you untangle almost a third of your life? How do you separate from ties that are all knotted up?

The clouds were hypnotic, disorienting. This is what stands out most. Not the wings. To look down on the world and just see white next to patches of less white. The clouds undulating below like some sea trapped in the sky. The sky cloaking the lands below in mystery.

#

I catch a blanket of birds in my periphery on my morning drive to school. The road stretches wet before me and the trees stand naked in winter Memphis. The area is beautiful even in this bareness. Fancy houses, with varying architecture. Some look like oversized Bavarian cottages, others small Italian villas. So many places in such a small area. Hills of green expand to my left. It is only a golf course, but it is better than the flatness I have become accustomed to after living two plus decades in Florida then moving to much of the same for graduate school. I like to imagine the people who have found themselves in this little pocket of Memphis. The systems that built this area a stone's throw from abject poverty. Opposing forces side by side.

But all I can think of today is the birds. A black oil slick covering a portion of the golf course far off in the distance. They look like specs. Little seeds. The lot taking off in flight, in tandem. The way they lift makes it look like a blanket caught in the wind, arcing back and forth together until they break form. Separate from each other. A dandelion in flight. Murmuration. A word of meditation. When I walk the racks at school a few minutes later, I notice the lake of water lining the railroad has diminished only a little from last night's fall, the one that kept me awake, my idea to wear my rain boots a good one.

It's been raining a lot lately, more days than not. I feel like the rain can maybe lead to some clarity, some insight as to why I've been in a funk. It's a moment I can disconnect from me and attach myself to the world, white noise blocking out everything. I don't know why people apologize for the rain. Or lament it. I want to express the beauty of the blanket of birds on the golf course, the ominous feeling I get when I see them. How the feelings are not mutually exclusive.

But I have to teach, so I scribble down some notes when I get to my desk then finalize my lesson plans. I hope to make sense of it later. Hope that the feeling is strong enough, that "blanket of birds" will somehow lead to flight.

#

The first compasses were made of lodestone—one of just a just a handful of naturally occurring magnetic rocks. I always confuse lodestone with keystones, the center rock in an arch, the stone that holds the edifice together. The stone that holds the other stones in place. Both rocks seem weighty. Foundational.

And soon I'm down a rabbit whole trying to make connections because I feel like I'm starting to become unattached. Words connecting to each other. Connecting back to me. Lodestone. A magnetic rock. Linked to motherlode, a vein rich in mineral. Vein. A fracture in rock. Veins contain mineral resources. Stratum. Like a vein, a layer of rock. Also, the name of my first apartment in Memphis, not the one I'm at now, and not the new one I will be at in a year. Or the other address two years after that.

When I'm back on track I read early compasses weren't used for navigation at all but for geomancy—a form of divination—and Feng Shui. The Chinese found that a piece of lodestone suspended in the air, free to move about, would point to Earth's magnetic pole and ascribed

magical properties to the rock. The lodestone could orient itself because the earth itself is one big magnet, creating tiny magnets in the form of lodestone. The Chinese used these early compasses to find the right spot to build a home. To orient buildings for optimal energy. Because even stones can find directions. Even stones can find homes.

#

I am set to head to LA in less than a week. A last-minute decision to attend a writing conference, decided on impulse, ignored for an evening in lieu of much needed rest, finalized at a coffee shop with a friend. I tweet out “Make like Balboa” after I buy my plane ticket. A small part, quiet, reminds me this will be my first flight since Pittsburgh. This will be my first flight sans Maggie in my life. But even that isn’t quite right.

This will also be my first time west of the Mississippi, a meridian that felt mythological as child. Even still as an adult. To venture on the other side. To create new ties. To break old ones. Maybe I will look down at the clouds as if they are some giant Rorschach. Or perhaps at the screen on the chair in front of me. The temperature will read negative sixty-four degrees Fahrenheit. I will turn to my friend and say “I think there is something wrong with the screen. The temperature is wrong.” I will squint at the screen as my fingers try to trace the line of numbers.

My friend will tell me “That’s the temperature outside the plane right now.” Her face will search my for understanding as I turn from the screen to face her with a confused look. She will say “It’s not the temperature of the city. It’s the temperature of the sky.”

And I’ll close my eyes against this thought, resist the urge touch the window, as I let this new information to sink in. The bar-tailed godwit has the longest nonstop migration of any bird,

flying at an altitude of 20,000 feet. Temperatures here can reach negative twelves degrees Fahrenheit.

The average commercial liner weighs less than the average cloud and still we think of clouds as weightless.

#

The origin of the word “magnet” is likely linked to the mythological person Magnes the shepherd as told by Pliny the Elder, a man who studied nature and the earth, wrote an encyclopedia of the natural world. I see the infinitesimal strings between us as I scribble his name down and think of the ways I like to collect and categorizes information. I see the ways in which my literary heritage stretches back in new discoveries.

In the story, Magnes leads his flock to new grazing pastures. While traversing the base of Mount Ida, the nails in Magnes’ shoes fly towards a strange rock. His shoes stick. Magnetic attraction. The rock is lodestone.

As with all mythology, the story is borrowed and changed. Embellished and relocated to suit audience. Some versions place Magnes further east in India. Because even stories about sticking to place change.

I never thought I’d leave Florida then I did. I thought my current apartment would last me through grad school, but it won’t. My roommate is moving back to Florida and will have her boxes packed by the time I get back from Los Angeles. A few months ago, I saw myself setting down roots, but in a handful more I won’t be so sure..

#

I write down only the moment. The birds on the golf course. A different moment than before.

The same oil slick though. The same blanket in the wind turning into a dandelion spread across

the world. The only reason I know it is different is because I see them head on instead of in my periphery as I did on my first drive. A block in the road until I approach. Before the birds were on the golf course, too far away to touch. But now I feel like I can reach through my windshield my body losing shape to join the birds in their rolling dance as they barricade the road against travel. For a second, I feel amorphous sitting in my car, halfway between my apartment and school. My breath shortens and can't move while the birds enter my chest. I grip the wheel in ragged breaths.

#

Lodestone was eventually used in navigational compasses. Individuals would rub the lodestone on a needle—in a single direction—transferring the magnetic properties of the lodestone to the needle. The needle would align itself to the magnetism of the lodestone, the magnetism of the earth. And knowing one direction, travelers and explorers could orientate themselves to the rest.

Travel of course was possible before the discovery of magnetic compass. Pliny the Elder had a ship when he died in 79 AD when Vesuvius erupted almost a hundred years before the Chinese used loadstone to build homes. Explorers used stars such as Polaris to find north. The astrolabe, Greek for star-taking, to locate time and place. The distance of celestial bodies could tell early mariners time of day, time of year, and even their latitude. I've largely forgotten the instructions on how to use a compass from nature's classroom in seventh grade; I can't begin to imagine the intricacies of the astrolabe.

But the magnetic compass, the navigational compass, enabled people to know where they were when the stars were obscured by clouds. The compass enabled people to stray from the coasts, to sail freely over vast swaths of ocean. To make like Balboa.

#

I have notebooks scattered about my apartment—shoved on bookcases, stuffed in bags, sitting on tables—filled with notes from classes. Writing prompts from classes. Random bits of info I hope I can work into essays. *The feet as home. Mount Everest is still growing. Melted wax is the same as solid wax.* I look at these notes and wonder how Pliny made *Naturalis Historia*. How he knew what information to keep, where that information would be homed.

The birds from the golf-course and road still consume me, especially after reading an essay on corvids, so I take a notebook from my bag and begin searching my computer for other facts about magpies and crow, ravens and blue jays. *Birds in the corvid family will hold little bird funerals.* My pen scratches at the paper furiously as I try to hold down the anxiety that been nipping at me all semester. *Their pointed wings make them adept flyers. They can travel long distances, like large birds of prey, but it is rare for them to do so.* I draw line away from this notes and scribble “opportunistic flyers?” *Noah released a raven from the ark to see if it was safe for the family to disembark. The raven never came back.*

#

A few years ago scientist found the neural links in birds that help translate the Earth’s magnetic field. They already knew birds—other animals as well—had the equivalent of a GPS in their brains that enabled a decent sense of direction. It's why birds can return home after migrating in the winter. The researchers eliminated any mitigating factors cancelling out Earth’s natural magnetic field via tesla coil, as well as light polarization effects. Fifty-three neurons had advanced activity when scientists examined these birds in some darkened room. More important, those neurons showed the most activity when scientists adjusted the tesla coil to mirror Earth's magnetic field. The birds were attuned to the earth. They knew the magnetic frequency of their home.

#

It is spring break which is not really a break when one is both student and teacher. My apartment has Netflix and other distractions, so I head to campus. The rain has been crazy. Just days and days of words falling from the sky that I have to ignore in favor of my own students' writing. *Pathos is a great show of emotion.* I am still learning to temper my comments to student's work so instead of writing an incredulous *what!* I simply put down "circular definition" and leave it at that.

What I want to do is write about the sound of the rain on my jacket. The *plinks* that surrounded me on my walk from my car to the English building. I stand outside letting the rain fall around me like a sheath, pause in this familiar sound. The one I couldn't place the night before when I couldn't sleep. It didn't sound plastic then, but there is something in this noise that makes me want to stay outside, to let the sky stain my jacket. I pause a second more and take a deep breath to center myself before I head up the steps to the building where the walls will hide the sound of the rain.

Upstairs with friends I talk about the sky. Another blanket in my life. This one, gray and white. Ominous and lovely like the birds.

"It's supposed to rain until Monday," Elle says slamming the desk with her open hand.

It is Friday and I can tell she is mad or concerned, so I say nothing of my desire for the rain to continue, offering a weak "I'm sorry," reaching out my hand to brush her shoulder.

She leans her head on my hand to return my offer of commiseration and I am immediately thankful for our friendship formed from teaching. I don't think I would survive this semester without her support.

Still, I need the rain to stay long enough, for me to get through grading, for me to get to writing. For me to make sense of the world and why it would rain for days straight. To figure out what processes could have formed such clouds. To calculate the weight in all that rain.

#

When we speak of life on planets, we often speak of atmosphere. The combination of gases at the upper edge of the planet that makes spaces habitable. Venus has an atmosphere rich in carbon dioxide. This atmosphere creates thick clouds that blanket the planet. These clouds form a greenhouse affect creating surface temperatures that can melt lead. Mars, too, has an atmosphere rich in carbon dioxide. Its atmosphere is thin though. No greenhouse. Mars is quite cold. A summer night on Mars can reach as low as minus 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

When I was a child concerned with the hole in the Ozone layer of Earth, I asked my father if it was possible to terraform Mars in hopes of creating a better atmosphere. A new place to live if the hole in the Ozone ever made Earth uninhabitable. I didn't know then the necessity of a magnetosphere. The ability to form and maintain clouds dependent on factors having nothing to do with the sky.

Mars may have once had an atmosphere similar in thickness to that of Earth. It also had a magnetic field to protects all this. But lost its magnetosphere 4 billion years ago. Without this, solar winds started slowly thin Mars' atmosphere. This atmosphere before this probably contained clouds of water instead of clouds of dust. Earth did not succumb to the same fate as Mars because of its magnetism. The molten iron core sending out an unseen magnetic field, a protective barrier from the solar winds.

#

I wake to the sound of rain outside my window. Insomnia kept me up until two and my alarm has yet to go off, which means it's before eight. And I want to cry because this is a terrible way to wake, except the rain outside.

It is still faux spring break and I drive to campus to work on grading again. A friend asks if I get more work done here. "I get less Netflix done," I tell her not looking up from the essay I'm grading. I finish writing comments on a paper in time to hear a train go by, and turn to see the barricades lower, preventing cars from crossing tracks

The fastest train on earth, not the one outside the window, is powered by magnets. The change in attractions and repulsion propelling the vehicle on set tracks.

I wait for the hard break of horns from the train signaling the danger in crossing it's path.

When I first moved to Memphis, I thought the train sounded like a mistuned piano, still somehow beautiful. Musical like the rain. Maybe the train only sounds different since I've moved apartments. Same and different all at once.

Outside the window, the train rumbles down tracks like thunder. The sky is another gray, a stiff wall behind buildings making it difficult to discern where the sky begins or ends. The clouds are nimbostratus. An occluded front, like the birds in the road. Cold overtaking warm air.

Stratus. Latin. A spreading. Spread out. Spread across. Spread thin. I wonder how, much weight is above me. How much keeps me tethered to the ground. There are as many miles between my old apartment and my new one as there are between letters. Stratus, of the sky. Stratum, belonging to the ground.

#

It's nearly impossible to get any work done in the Teaching Assistant dungeon. It's the basement and it's always fucking cold. Conversations turn from academic—if they were ever that to start

with—faster than a Florida summer thunderstorm dissipates. Elle is trying work out a lesson to explain to students the concept of analysis by using theories vs. laws. The idea that their analysis need be only supported theory. The idea there is no one correct answer only the one they argue for.

“You have the theory of gravity, but this is only one explanation to the why objects fall to earth,” Elle says as she turns her chair to face me. She wears a rare smile since we’ve started our second semester of teaching

“We are all attracted to Earth’s molten core,” I suggest a little too loudly as a smile spreads across my face too. This idea excites me more than it should as my arms wave about trying to contain some of this new energy.

She smiles even broader and nods from amusement. I talk about magnets too much.

“The iron in our blood is attracted to the earth. The same with animals,” She adds trying to flesh out the idea more. Elle laughs and I do too as she turns to her desk write down the thought before it is lost.

“Everything is made of magnets!” I add slamming my hand down on my desk disrupting some fellow teaching assistants in the process.

#

Our whole world is held together by magnetic attraction. The electrons in atoms are attracted to protons. The charge of atoms is attracted to the charge of other atoms creating molecules. All of this is bound together by light in ways I don’t fully understand as the TV plays in the background years after my conversation with Elle. The universe is bound up in electromagnetism, my theory not all together wrong. The balance of attraction and repulsion. Holding us all in equilibrium.

#

I am supposed to head to Ireland this summer—a place full of clouds—if I can get my shit together enough to change the program on my application from the two week to the four week, get my needed records up to the application page, get my passport so I can get the needed records that need to be uploaded to the application page, eat so I have the energy to do at least one of those things.

Maggie went to Ireland without me. She returns again and again in ways unexpected. Little bitter-nesses popping up in ways that makes me angry to still hold connections, to escape the way people remain tied up in the past and memories. It's hard to escape the idea of Ireland being fated. To live out some experience I thought I had missed as an undergraduate because Maggie and I were fighting, because I am a scatter brain, because it never occurred to me to go to Ireland without Maggie.

If I were a goose, it would take me just over twelve days to fly from Memphis to Cork if I were to maintain a steady speed of 330 miles per day. Assuming I wasn't crossing the Atlantic and could stop for food in between flights. If I was a bar-tailed godwit I could make it in just over five days. No need to stop. I could even fly further if I wanted to. Nothing would stop me except the magnet in my brain saying home was one thing or another.

#

Scientists have magnetite in the human brain. The same regions of the brain across humans. The oldest parts of our brains. The stem. The cerebellum. We also have magnetite in our noses like birds have in their beaks. Humans may have once been sensitive to Earth's magnetic field. Like birds finding their way. Like Magnes finding himself stuck to the Earth.

Stratus. Stratum. The same family of words. Connected by letters. Separated by one.

#

I am shocked on my morning drive when I see a bird out in the drizzle that pervades Memphis. School is back and so are the birds. It makes sense for the birds to emerge in the breaks of rain to feast on the bugs pushed up from the earth. I have seen this at least once on my morning drive. But to see one out when it is still raining goes against what I think of birds. But I am not a bird person, I know nothing of them except what I care to research.

In my office I type “birds” and “rain,” into Google. The results yielding nothing so I type in “flying.” From the screen I learn birds can in fact fly in the rain. Oil makes their feather waterproof. A protective barrier. I take a blue post-it and write this down in neat letters and return to the screen. *They only become grounded in periods of prolonged rain. The air too thin, too full of water, to sustain flight.*

This must be one of the birds I saw take off like a dandelion. It is not the gray and red of the robins near my apartment, the ones that shit on my car, but slick and black with a brilliant blue at the tip of its wings. It makes me think of corvids. Crows holding little bird funerals. Ominous and lovely all at once. Stratus. Stratum.

Spring break is over, and I do not have time to ruminate on the lives of birds.

#

There are stars in our universe with intense magnetic fields. So intense if we were to get to close, they could rip our atoms apart because our atoms are held together by electromagnetism. The same forces that hold us together could destroy us.

A small starquake on a magnetar, a slip of crust measured in millimeters, centimeters at best, on a celestial body smaller than some cities, sends a magnetic disruption across our galaxy. Traveling 50,000 light years to blind our satellites in 2004. The brightest cosmic explosion in recorded history. Brighter than a full moon. The same amount of energy our sun gives off in

250,000 years. An event lasting only a tenth of a second but strong enough to disturb our atmosphere. Our magnetosphere. I think of Mars, it's disappearing magnetosphere, it's thinned atmosphere. The boiling of oceans if Earth met the same fate. It's unnerving to know the dangerous forces out of our control.

As one scientist puts it, "In the cosmic menagerie of beast and ghouls and things that go bump in the night, I think magnetars are at the very top of the list of that are really pretty scary."

#

Springs breaks though in Memphis. A brilliant cloudless sky that I at first hate. I want the rain back. That original feeling of being on the brink of some discovery. But as the days pass the clouds remain at bay, the city gives way to new life. Everything is painted green, brown grass transformed. Trees erupt in blooms the shade of apple and sangria, violet and cotton. Some hang in gossamer ribbons others in tight bunches like grapes. I mistake some for crepe myrtles, until Elle corrects me. "They bloom later, closer to summer." Her voice is kind and I realize I don't feel defensive about being wrong, like how I would feel with Maggie.

I remember one I admired on campus when I first moved here. A canopy of cotton candy against the faded red brick of some non-descript building. I am sure my father would know the names of each plant. He is an encyclopedia for plants, like Pliny. He has a magnet in his brain. I inherited my mother's sense of direction.

I wonder if I will see the birds again. Or if they were only here for winter. If their brains have flipped some magnetic switch telling them to leave. "Yes. You're right. Summer. I knew that," I tell Elle. I will be in Ireland by then I tell myself.

#

There is a class of bacteria that live in water called magnetotactic bacteria. These bacteria produce tiny minerals made of magnetite, the same mineral that makes lodestone magnetic, by absorbing the iron from its watery home. These minerals, these nanomagnets, are smaller than a millimeter, smaller than the slips of crusts on magnetars that can threaten life here on Earth. Too small and weak to do much of anything until they chain themselves up. When chained up these minerals in the bacteria start acting like a compass, so effective the bacteria are still attuned to Earth's magnetic field even after they die.

While birds use their magnetic homing for long migrations, magnetitic bacteria use this magnetic homing to find the best place that is immediately around them. The perfect depth, the perfect oxygenation. Like the early Chinese, the bacteria use magnetism to find the perfect home.

The bacteria have implications for both health and technology delivering medicine in the blood to targeted locations or packing more information into smaller areas.

#

I arrive on campus early for a meeting, stressed at the number of items I need to check off my list before my trip to LA: Finalize lessons plans for the sub on Wednesday, run to Target to pick up travel size contact solution, pack when I get back to my apartment, finish the last 200 pages of a novel then write a two page response paper, head back to campus for another meeting with my advisor at four, edit my response paper, attend class at 5:30. Stratus. Spread out. Spread thin.

But when I emerge from my car into the cardigan-cool Memphis morning, all I see is a brilliant azure sky streaked with wispy tails of clouds. The sun stands in some patchwork of these. Something in me lightens, the clouds no longer pressing in around me. Soon I'll make like Balboa. Later I'll go to Ireland.

I head to my downstairs office, the TA dungeon, to pick up my laptop I left in my desk the previous night. On the way I pick up a dandelion, hold it in my hands till I can think of some wish not lame. I close my eyes and spread the seeds across campus.

When I get to my desk I punch a note into my phone to ruminate on later: Birds can fly because they have hollow bones. Clouds float despite their weight.

Amoravorous

1. I adopted a cat last year. Sometimes when she is sitting on the floor purring, I think, "I love her so much" followed by "I will outlive her." This line of thought always makes me sad and is almost always followed by "I hope I outlive her." Then I feel guilty
2. The cat's name is Luna, a Harry Potter reference, not a Sailor Moon one.
3. Sometimes I like to look up useless facts.
4. I believe these can often offer insight into the human condition.
5. Pablo Picasso used to burn his paintings to keep warm.
6. My roommate hates fire. The other day I randomly lit four birthday candles just to blow them out. We had the candles on hand from a party and it seemed wasteful to let them sit in a state of disuse as we already inserted the candles into the cupcake.
7. The cupcake was almond cake with salted caramel icing. It was also vegan and about a half a week old.
8. I feel guilty about the candles and my roommate's fear of fire.
9. I chose the name Luna after a series of forgettable names because it highlighted the cat's sweetness but also the fact she was a bit crazy. My dad likes to call her Luna-tic, or Tic for short.
10. When I expressed to my mother my intense love for Luna, she told me that it wasn't healthy. She often utters the phrase "If anything ever happened to you or your brothers," and I want to tell her I understand now, the kind of love that leads to morbid ruminations, but I don't think she will understand me.
11. The half-week-old cupcake was also slightly burnt.

12. When my grandmother died, Luna would lay by my face and purr and purr and purr. This almost always led to me crying. I often didn't know which love spurred the tears.
13. According to the National Fire Protection Association in 2016, a home fire was reported every minute and a half in the United States.
15. My grandmother's favorite animal was butterflies.
16. I feel guilty I couldn't attend her funeral.
17. Annie Dillard, in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, writes of a giant water bug's assault on a hapless frog. The bug's bite dissolves the frog's innards until the frog is just a deflated sack floating on the water's surface.
18. This is a perfect example of consuming love.
19. I wish I could say I never had a love that hollowed out part of me, but this is not the case.
20. According to *Good Housekeeping* it takes less than ten minutes for a fire to consume a house.
21. It takes me about a weekend to consume a bag of Flamin Hot Cheese Puffs.
22. Butterflies will feast on rotting corpses.
23. I tell my friends this. And that it makes my grandmother's love of butterflies that much better. I don't think they understand.
24. Like my roommate, my mother also does not like fire. She seems to think an unwatched candle will spontaneously catch everything around it on fire, much like how watched pots never boils.
25. I tell my roommate this and she concurs with my mother's logic on fire.
26. My mom also thinks if I leave the kitchen when boiling water, the house will catch on fire.

27. My search for random facts keeps bringing up fire references such as "A single cup of gasoline, when ignited, has the same explosive power as five sticks of dynamite."
28. When I tell my roommate this, she makes a distressed noise.
30. I make a mental note not to keep a cup of gasoline randomly lying around.
31. And, also not to tell my mother of this fact.
32. I don't know why Picasso would burn paintings as this seems the least cost-effective way to stay warm.
33. When I tell my friend this, she mentions another example of burning paintings, in *Rent* I think, and the symbolism of burning something of commercial and cultural value for utilitarian purposes.
34. This makes me think of my mother wanting to be cremated when she dies.
35. Before my grandmother died, she loved chicken livers and gizzards. My father and uncle would sometimes pick some up from the convenience store on the way home from the grocery store.
36. When it comes to bacteria, our feelings of sickness usually come from our bodies' attack on the bacterium and not the bacterium itself. Our body's effort to protect itself is the issue.
37. This is also a nice example of consuming love.
38. I love that butterflies eat meat. And my grandmother ate gizzards. Even if I am neutral about butterflies in general and hate chicken gizzards myself.
39. Another fact about fire: The lighter was invented before the match.

40. Last night, in a hotel halfway between Tampa and Memphis, I cried for no reason. Lights out and the tears started pooling in my eyes. Not heaving sobs but not silent ones either. The kind of crying that usually comes with chronic, prolonged aches.
41. There was no pain. No existential angst. No looming dread. Just tears I could not place.
42. Luna was fine in the hotel.
43. She seems to always be fine and still I think about a life without her the way my mother thinks of a life without me.
44. This morning I loaded my belongings into my Silver Toyota Corolla, suitcase and small cooler, tumbler of iced coffee, and an extra muffin stolen at breakfast, for my trek back to Memphis. Walking back to the hotel room to retrieve Luna, I saw a black and yellow butterfly desiccating in the parking lot, wings half-fluttering, perhaps in the breeze, perhaps in the last spasm of life.
45. Potassium chloride will make a flame purple. My grandmother's favorite color. Sodium chloride would make it yellow. The color of the butterfly burning in the parking lot.
46. The sun was already high enough to warm my face and cause sweat to trickle down my spine though I was outside for less than ten minutes. My thoughts turned towards my grandmother, the butterfly box I made, all the knickknacks she collected of her favorite animal—ceramic butterflies hanging on the wall, plastic magnets from the fridge, boxes, and cards—when I was helping to clean out her house
47. The item I regret not taking, a butterfly pined in glass preserved forever. Not a monarch. But close.
48. Fire is a chemical reaction that releases light and heat. It is an event more than it is an object.

49. My uncle thinks his mother is a butterfly. This is a surprising, romantic thought for a man who is that uncle that every family has.
50. I do not have the heart to tell him a butterfly's lifespan is a handful of months, max.
51. Though, if I'm being honest, I like to think of my grandmother as a butterfly consuming nectar from flowers and gizzards from chickens.

**From Ireland
to Maggie**

I write to you from Ireland where it is currently sunny. Shocking, I know. Everything is so green in a way that makes me feel like if I lay down somewhere I could become part of something new. Was it this way when you were here? I'm sure it was. Such life can't die in a matter of years. From the plane, Cork looked like a patchwork quilt of life. Olive greens. Seaweed. Juniper. Emerald and Pear. Lime. Moss. Jade. Hunter. Sea and Sage. All segmented by another shade of green. It seems impossible one place could be so verdant. One could rip up Ireland roots and all, just to wrap themselves in it. It reminds me of Florida. Except not hot. And not swampy. So very little like Florida save for all the green. Maybe I am just missing home already. Or am making connections that aren't there.

From the plane, I also saw sheep running in a field. It was all so cliché. American abroad caught by the terrain of a new country. The movement of animals signifying...something. I don't know. Some sheep were running in a field and I smiled. Did you see sheep when you were here? I bet you were mostly in the city centers. I think the sheep mostly made me happy because it's not something that happens in Tampa. Or Memphis. Just the movement of it all. Bodies in motion. Plane in motion. Sheep in motion. And everything is alive. I didn't realize how stuck I've been feeling until I saw the world laid out before me in neat little malachite squares. Where you struck by all the green? Gaah. You probably didn't care. It's fine.

The sheep also made me think of yarn. There have to be some awesome stores here. You got me that one book when you were last here, remember? I complained at some point about patterns and gauging fitting me or being too much work. And then you found a book you thought

I might like. I still have it. But it's in Tampa. Maybe I can get you some yarn, and you can try your hand at knitting again.

What cities did you visit for your study abroad trip in 2010? 2011? I should have asked you about places to visit before I left. Things got crazy between moving—again!—and trying to do last minute stuff for Ireland—nothing like driving twelve hours back to Tampa last minute because that is the easier solution than trying to get my passport in Memphis. It was so much drama. At least I got to see my parents. I wish I got to see you though. It's been a tough semester and it feels like everything is two seconds away from falling in all around me. My university work spilled over into summer which made everything even more chaotic. But I'm here now and all the green is calming.

Jet lag did a number. I had to sleep three hours before I could even think about food. My first Irish meal was actually Chinese. The restaurant was so quiet even a whisper felt too loud. The food was good but not nearly spicy enough. It made me think of the time you, Lorraine, and I went to Bonefish Grill for—what holidays was it? The Fourth of July? It made no sense for us to be there. Some vague holiday so we all went out. Except you don't eat meat and I don't eat seafood. And we went to a seafood restaurant. You ordered the Diablo Chicken Pasta and asked for the chicken on the side. You figured could give it to your dad or your dog. I think the waitress judged us a little there. Your first bite told us the waitress had lied to you about the pasta's spiciness, at least by your standards. Granted you once thought it was weird for me to put salt and pepper on a tomato, so perhaps you should stay away from anything with the word "Diablo" in it in the future.

God, Lorraine and I couldn't stop laughing at you pouting about your food. But you took it all in stride. You may not be able to handle spicy food (or you know pepper—ha!), but you

don't mind silly friends. I understand why you said you liked the food in Ireland. I fear I will never find food I can accuse of being too spicy. If this is the worst of my troubles here, I should be fine.

Memphis calls when I'm done here—moving! agh!—but I should be back in Florida, hopefully early August. We should do something for my birthday. Traditional birthday picture at Chuck E Cheese? It's not sad when you're 28, right? Only when *you're* 28, right? I promise twenty-eight festivities won't be the disaster that was my 25th. It was tense, no? Or did I just read the moment wrong? Still, the past's the past, right?

Miss you.

#

Only my second night in and I'm already closing down bars. Or should I say pubs. I would say it's less fun when one is sober, but then one gets to see people pee in bushes on walks home at 3 am. But who hasn't had a night of public peeing after a few too many beers? Though, you know, this somewhat well; always choosing to be the sober one at parties. It's hard to imagine you sitting at some of these places. I can't remember you ever ordering a beer when we went out. You probably stuck to Guinness when you were in Ireland. You were never one for hard liquor unless it was some elaborate cocktail like a Snickers martini. And even these you didn't order often. Besides those aren't really pub drinks.

The first place our group went to had horrible house music. Did you ever go to places like this? If you did, I imagine you wouldn't have stayed long. I picture you more in a more mellow place, with a giant wooden bar. Something more old-world chic with worn leather stools. We stayed long enough only to comment on the quality of the music. The next place was filled with bodies moving to early 2000s alt-rock; comparatively better but it just felt so full. Little room,

near impossible to move unless it was to the music. I didn't even go in search of the bathroom. You would have found the place claustrophobic. I found the place claustrophobic.

Some point in the night the pub erupted in "Sweet Home Alabama," so maybe I can see you here. Dancing awkwardly in place, all movement coming from your knees eventually moving up to your shoulders. Geeze, remember our eighth-grade dance? You just bounced and swayed. I think Pam and I teased you a little. Or maybe you were yourself here in a way that I am not yet. Maybe you infiltrated groups with ease. I fear that I'm starting to feel stuck again. It's easier to meet new people with a wingman. It's easier to feel yourself when you have the comfort of known company.

I tried to take in everything at the pub. Someone too many drinks in hitting others on the head with an inflatable hand in the colors of the Irish flag. The dark hair of the bartender. Some other guy, drunk, kissing some other woman, also drunk. A mixed crowd of Irish and Americans singing along to songs I'm sure were played at our high school prom. Where you like this here? A more casual observer? So many of the people on the trip seem to already know each other and I don't know how to slide into these groups. What did you do?

I got my first free drink last night. It was a technicality but who cares. Dranks are dranks! Someone told someone else we needed three drinks for the table. Except we only needed two and I was the most sober so the trip leader felt most comfortable handing the drink off to me. It was my first Guinness in Ireland. Sláinte!

Where did you have your first Guinness? I remember you said you liked them here. Did you ever try a Jamison and ginger? This way be my new go-to drink. Simple and refreshing. I can't remember if Cork was part of your study abroad. It would be nice to wander the city center with someone who isn't directionally inept. I am terrified of getting lost since I don't have cell or

data access on my phone which means I can't use the phone's GPS. So, I am staying in more than I want to.

It's too soon in to imagine you in all these places, but like most aspects of my life you pop up. Maybe it's because after almost twenty years it's hard not to attach you to even the mundane.

You were right, Guinness is a little different here.

Maybe we can do the faux British pub at the rich persons' mall when I am back in Florida for my birthday. At least it's the least faux of the faux Irish bars around town.

Unbearably sober. Ha! Love.

#

It feels like it's been forever. Dublin was strange. On the bus ride to the Guinness brewery it started to rain. Large beads that pushed water out of puddles, like the storms in Florida summer minus the thunder. The windows on the bus started to fog up. At least the countryside was beautiful while I could still see it. I still find it impressive so much green can exist in one place. I'm sad to report, I did not see any sheep on the bus due to the foggy windows.

At the brewery, our group took a picture in front of the waterfall inside and the world blurred out behind the gush. I know this is a bit much. But, I don't know, it was just something that I noticed and liked. It made me feel a little more like myself. Or maybe it made me feel ok about stuff disappearing. Maybe it just reminded me of heavy rainstorms in Florida. I'm still having trouble fitting in. My social awkwardness is about a level 10 right now. I've made a few friends, but all of them seem to have made closer friends. It would be nice to have someone to really explore these places with. This was Friday.

On Saturday I had lunch with a Memphis friend who also went on the excursion. Cheesecake, onion rings, and an Amaretto sour. It made me think of my fabulous dinner choice when you ordered your Diablo chicken that one time. I got a crème brûlée and some blackberry cocktail, my solution to dining at a seafood restaurant when I don't eat seafood. It was quite decadent. I started dancing in my chair when there wasn't any music. The Memphis friend asked with a smile if I was ok and the truth was it was the most me I've felt in a while and I hadn't even sipped my drink yet. How does someone forget to have fun?

After lunch, I dance-walked the streets of Dublin while music from the Pride parade washed over the streets. We were too far away from the actual parade for anybody to join me in my rhythmic renderings of Y.M.C.A. Our group saw a play at the Gate Theatre, much better than the play we saw in Cork, then afterwards grabbed dinner together. Walking from the play to dinner I saw a guy purge his festivities from the day over the streets of Dublin. Didn't even bend over, just stood against a pole and purged. It was alarming as it was impressive. I don't think anyone else saw it.

Still no concrete plans for birthday festivities yet. Maybe we can do a nice dinner at Bonefish. The crème brûlée wasn't as I remember it the last time I was there, but it could be nice. Anything can be better than the 25th. Were you feeling ok? It seemed like you weren't feeling well or were maybe upset.

Let me know if you are free.

#

This last weekend I went to Kinsale. You would have loved it. It's basically the Irish version of St. Augustine. Small, historic, costal. Didn't get much of a chance to explore but I did have a

pork belly with a root vegetable puree that can only be described as divine. I don't think there was a single thing you could order there.

Near the water was a replica of a Spanish galleon and this was the only thing I took pictures of. Not the pretty flowers. Not the quaint city streets. Not even my delicious food. Just a picture of a replica of a ship I could easily see in Florida at Gasparilla. How can so much of one place exist in another?

I don't think I want to go to St. Augustine for my birthday. We exhausted all the fun activities last time we were there—hokey ghost tour, Pirate Haus pancakes, Fountain of Youth. Though, now I'm remembering the amazing sweet potato pancake with mole sauce at Casa Maya and am reconsidering. Maybe we can do a weekend trip to the beach. Memphis makes me miss the ocean. And seeing the harbor here makes me want to go swimming. The last time we went to the beach together we were both in sweaters. I think I even had on gloves and that just doesn't seem right. My body craves the warm sand and saltwater. I think I'm moving away from the idea of a birthday dinner anyway.

I hate that we fought at my twenty-fifth dinner, though fight isn't the exact word. And that was so long ago, so it shouldn't matter right? Besides looking at these letters, I'm starting to think I'm obsessed with food and I am not sure I want this to be a defining personality trait.

Beach then?

xoxo

#

I feel like we haven't talked in forever. I stumbled across this article about what we mean when we say we are "busy," so I won't even use that as an excuse. The article basically talked about how we have all this technology that connects us, also something about choices and priorities.

The author was mostly talking about "busy" in a business sense, how it sends messages about caring about certain matters and taking others seriously, but I think it applies to relationships too.

Life has been exhausting. Facebook is filled with daily updates about the violence of Memphis. The city is on pace to surpass its previous record of homicides and even thousands of miles away in Ireland I feel the weight of this. Then this summer that hasn't much felt like summer either because of work. And my mom has cancer, and she should be fine, but the whole situation has made me start to think about people dying and spending time with them. But every time I go back to Florida, I feel like there are less people there and I wonder what I'm going back for. I mean who do you still talk to from high school? College?

Whatever. It doesn't matter that we haven't talked in a while. I'm writing you now. That's what matters, right?

Some friends and I went out last night here in Cork. After a few drinks and a few different places, I gave my body over to the music like I didn't the first time I went to a pub here. Rhythm radiating from my shoulders down through my hips and thighs. The place was still full, but I felt a part of that fullness. Bodies swaying, popping on beats. The club played an electronic remake of Tracy's Chapman's "Fast Car."

We gotta make a decision. Leave tonight or live and die this way

Even at the fast tempo, the lyrics hit. It's such a good fucking song!

When I got home I had the strangest dreams. In one I was in the backroom what looked like some weird mix of a coffee house and bar. Other people were around but I was talking to some man and woman. It was actually Kim Kardashian and Kanye, which made it feel more bizarre. The woman was trying to tell me I owed her money. I asked how much and what for. She said twenty-five hundred for all the stuff she had done. Driving me around, buying me

clothes, picking up the tab whenever we went out. I turned around to look at the guy, who was sitting on some other couch and he just looked away. He couldn't be bothered. Then I got mad. Livid. Some hate I didn't realize could live in a person without killing her. The kind of rage that makes you hurt just a little.

I started yelling. The woman started crying. I wouldn't allow it. It wasn't about her. I went up to her grabbed her face, pinched her jaw together at her chin. I wanted her to look at me. Wanted her to see my fury. When she tried to turn her head away from the heat of my mouth, I moved my face until it was almost touching hers. If she wasn't going to look at me, she was going to feel my ire. I *needed* her to feel what I felt.

"I owe you nothing," I said. "Nothing." Then I backed away and she was crying even more. I felt nothing as I looked in my purse and took out a few euros. "You want something from me?" I asked. Then I threw a twenty at her and said, "That's all your worth."

After that, I just walked out. Didn't look back. Passed some people I knew when I exited the bar. They didn't seem concerned for me, though it was clear I was the one who was just yelling, causing a scene. I swear one said something to the effect "I thought I heard you in the back.'

But I didn't look back and no one came after me.

Odd, right?

In the other dream I was hosting a party. Everyone was talking and drinking. And I can't remember anything specific except people seemed happy. Then some guy had too much to drink and had to ralph but instead of going to the bathroom he just purged the contents of himself, expertly I might add, into an empty bucket that was intended to hold drinks and ice. Everyone seemed nonchalant as they just stared at a guy throwing up in the middle of the room. When he

was finished, I pointed to the utility room. He picked up the bucket, fine now, and walked away smiling, the toxicity in him no longer there. I went back to talking to the group I was with and everything was fine.

It all seemed so strange at first, but now I'm afraid it makes perfect sense. And before, in the dream I was angry then calm, and now that I'm awake I want to cry. And I don't know what to do, or what to say to feel better.

#

I keep trying to find the tenderness I felt for you when we played *Castle of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse* when we were eight. Or when you showed up to comfort me when Shadow died. Or when you called me at graduation to say, "We did it." I still have the message on my phone, yet I can't say why. And I sense it here in my letters, my lack of tenderness. My inability to tap into that part of me because at a certain point all you have left of a person is a voice mail left on a phone five years ago offering sisterhood and love on graduation and some toxic buildup of love you can't explain and can't let go of even though that that person hasn't spoken to you in three years.

You haven't spoken to me in three years.

I want to explain why you meant so much and the best I can come up with is that we were a tree. Not two trees, but some single tree. Verdant as all of Ireland. And we grew around each other and we inhabited each other's lives to where it's impossible to separate you from the past, from me. Stories lead back to you when they aren't about you. And I hate this single tree with this internal history that doesn't make sense from the outside and is impossible to explain. I tell people about you and they say you're a bitch. But you're not. Or they say, I should hate you. But

I don't. You just took up so much of my life, my childhood, so call the cuts, even unintentionally ones go deeper.

One could cut us open and count the years in rings we were friends. I want our history laid out there in our bodies as a tree, examined and exposed, because at least this means the tree would be dead. Because you haven't spoken to me since my twenty-fifth birthday, not even to explain why you won't talk to me. So, my last memory of you is your clipped answers to my questions about your life which should have never been small talk in the first place, not after almost twenty years of growing around each other like the insides of a tree. Not as I passed the threshold of a quarter of a century in some Italian place that couldn't decide if it was an elegant eatery or sports bar.

Me: "Hey! It's been a while. How's it going?"

You: "Fine."

Then some nibbles of food to combat the awkwardness. Another attempt.

"Have you looked anymore into getting a new car?"

"No."

A mixture of pain and anger and stubbornness as I can't let go because that goddamned tree was like a sister.

"How's work been? Still like it at the VA?"

"It's fine."

If we are a tree, it's one that's been hollowed out like a history that never existed and I don't know what to do with all the empty space you take up. Because really, that tree just needs to die already.

And these letters were never for you. But still I keep turning over dreams and images and memories because I want to understand while Ireland feels like Florida but doesn't and why we felt like friends but aren't, why I picture you as Kim Kardashian and put a number on your worth, how I can inhabit an aloofness when someone barfs on the street and at my imaginary party, what it means for better memories if I now see you as toxic. Why haven't we spoken in three years? And why on Ireland's green earth, can I not just let go of that damned tree.

#

The city was lovely today. Everyone in the program was away on one of the weekend excursions so I stole away a moment for myself. Left behind some reading and writing and other responsibilities. Just went into the city because all I wanted when I woke up this morning was a dress. The one I brought from the states, an ivory lace fit-and-flare, just didn't seem to work for either fun nights out or even more quiet ones. Perhaps the best things we can do for ourselves is to surrender. To admit that even a well-loved dress isn't the right fit.

In town I picked up three dresses after much trial and error. For a moment I was discouraged at needing to pick up the size 16 dress forgetting the American translation. But I am happy to say I walked out of H&M with three new dresses that will be great for a night out here in Cork as well as for teaching in Memphis. What lays beyond the dresses after that remains a mystery.

Back at the apartment I decided to write you and I cried. Big wet beads turning sections of my lime green comforter a modicum darker.

I read recently scientist can tell the trauma trees experienced by the rings we were told as children signified the years of life, information I am sure I heard before but forgot. Sometimes the bark grows thicker on one side of a tree than the other because of wind or competing trees, lack of water or light. Sometimes growth slows because of fires. Life doesn't grow in symmetry.

When a tree loses a branch, it tries to heal itself creating new bark to cover the freshly exposed area, but inside the tree are the ripples of this loss, a comparative thinness on one side of the ring. But the tree endures, heals till the ripple is less felt. But even heals is the wrong word. The tree doesn't replace tissue only plasters it loss.

You probably don't care about the dresses or the trees but I'm starting to wonder if this matters anymore. Tomorrow I go off in search of shoes for my new dresses. I've been spending too much time in my room with you. Don't worry about my birthday. It will be nice to spend time with family and I can always go to the beach myself. Or even dinner.

From Ireland.

All the best.