

Parts & Accessories: Essays

By

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## Abstract

A collection of discreet essays, ranging in subject from childhood thievery to foxing to weather to the dash.

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## Introduction

Just over a year ago, I sat near the back of a crowded conference room at a writers' conference in Chicago, black moleskin notebook on my knee, for a session titled "A Tribute to Scott Russell Sanders." I had heard Sanders read in a large auditorium a few hours earlier and stayed after to purchase one of his books, my first, and have him sign it. Mine had been the last book he signed, and I could only whisper a "hello" and my name as the next session began while he wrote. He left then, and I sat down to sneak paragraphs from the introduction to *A Paradise of Bombs* in between the unfamiliar panel of readers.

During the tribute that afternoon, Sanders's colleagues from Indiana University shared stories and read passages from his work, and though I had read only two essays of his at this point, I listened for the secrets of my new chosen mentor. The "tribute" became a class on being an essayist. *Here is what Scott does*, they said, *and here is why it's wonderful*. I nodded and forgot to take notes.

After the tributes, Sanders stood at the microphone and declined to read. He spoke instead about what it meant to him to write essays: "What does it mean to be human?" He looked around the room, and my eyes followed. "Writing ought to serve human living," he said, and I wrote that down in my notebook, gave it its own page. As he spoke, the tributes rang true, and it was clear his intent with writing and the outcome were one in the same. He wrote of humanity, and we learned of humanity as we read his work.

I came to writing to explore relationships—relationships with my family, with my home, and with nature. These explorations first (and for many years) took shape in poems because poetry was all I had studied or paid attention to in high school. Fiction seemed too foreign and

feigned to suit my need, and, beyond a few pieces by Annie Dillard and Martin Luther King Jr., I was yet blind to the genre of literary nonfiction. So ignorant to the possibility of form, I knew no other definition for the word “essay” besides “academic paper.”

But in poems, inspired by Emily Dickinson’s brevity, I was drawn to the compression of language and meaning, and the need to express a world in a few words. Poems felt manageable. Poems, it seemed, could answer the why’s.

After dozens of poems accumulated, however, I found myself trying to pack too many worlds into single poems. There were too many connections, too many backgrounds, too many unthreaded ends. The answers weren’t coming, and my poems lacked meaning beyond my own meager intentions. Yet, as G. Douglas Atkins writes in *Tracing the Essay* on his “conversion from the article to the essay,” with poetry, “I could not, would not, sustain thought, which I vainly sought to contain and capture, mistaken in believing that if instead I released it, it would soon escape or vanish.”<sup>1</sup> My cupped hands overflowed with words, but still I tried to break the lines and cut verses off at the knees; I wouldn’t let myself go.

“Essays, however, hang somewhere on a line between two sturdy poles: this is what I think, this is what I am,” says Edward Hoagland.<sup>2</sup> My study of the essay and essayists—Montaigne, Hazlitt, Belloc, Dillard, White, Sanders, Selzer—began a mere two years ago in the midst of the poetic struggle to say what I meant to say. The *patience* of these essayists and the *movement* of their essays awakened me: I discovered that, all along, I had thought condensing was the natural method for the urgency of my questions, when, really, I had been longing to let loose. Let loose, not in a journal but in a form that could contain tangents and seemingly separate ideas. A number of my poems, I saw, stretched beyond their borders too far for the poem to be effective. They wanted more room, and room for more voices.

Hoagland writes, “A personal essay is like the human voice talking, its order the mind’s natural flow, instead of a systemized outline of ideas.”<sup>3</sup> As I began writing essays and, ultimately, converting poems into their destined form, I learned my voice and imagination suited the essay. I fell in love, and my questions fell into essays. Allowing the parts and pieces of my life to break down and fill entire rooms, pages, of essays, the relationships took shape not in pointed poems but through the *process* of attempting an understanding through an essay. Metaphors surfaced, like leaking gas, to give meaning to these relationships: “Metaphor is an ‘equation’ consisting of a clearly-stated object half and an image that’s open-ended, one that offers a larger perspective, one that offers the reader an opportunity to see something new each time she returns to it. Contemplation of the relationship between these two halves leads to understanding.”<sup>4</sup> Two halves—though each unique and, on the surface, unrelated—spoke and revealed attempted answers.

So my essays took root, assumed layers, spread out with “energetic loose ends.”<sup>5</sup> The essay can be thought of, I learned from G. Douglas Atkins, as *site*: the “line between two sturdy poles” of literature and philosophy, fact and fiction, self and other, body and spirit, product and process. The essay approaches meaning only in, through, and by means of experience. It consistently weighs, takes measure of, and relates experiences to create meaning—a meaning that does not come into being by itself but rather by means of relation. Here, in this relation, I again attempted to answer my why’s.

“Knowledge is not made out of knowledge. Knowledge swims up from invention and imagination—from ardor—and sometimes even an essay can invent, burn, guess, try out, dig up, hurdle forward, succumb to that flood of sign and nuance that adds up to intuition, disclosure, discovery,” writes Cynthia Ozick in the foreword to *Art & Ardor*.<sup>6</sup> For me, these essays here

have guessed at life—at my relationships that I hope serve as examples for all readers, for the entire human condition. Like Sanders, “I write of my own life only when it seems to have a larger bearing on the lives of others,” for I am a daughter of the disco generation, a migrant student surviving alone, and a girl raised in the indulgence—think boy bands and social networking—of the last two decades.<sup>7</sup>

So, I “set out with empty pockets from scratch” and stuff them as I go with toy planes, lightning, hopes, sunspots, and views from every window, with Scott Russell Sanders whispering over my shoulder.<sup>8</sup>

## Once a Thief

It began with grapes. As a young child, I would lag behind my mother in the grocery store to loot the fruits that could fit whole between my lips, cheeks sunk in for the kiss of red skin. I'd pop one off as we passed the produce and pretend to wipe my nose while I slipped it into my mouth like a stone, heavy and hard on my tongue, and I waited for a safe moment to chew. With feigned curiosity, I'd turn to face the bananas or graze my palm over a pineapple, all the while wiggling my jaws into the fruit's skin, juice draining in bittersweet currents. A swallow erased the evidence.

My thievery was not limited to the edible. Whenever I had pockets, my hands were drawn to miniature objects that could disappear under the material, things that could be hidden in small spaces. Neither was my thievery limited to any time of day, location, or number of other shoppers around. When I was five, I tried to steal three crayons out of a display at a mall kiosk. The crayons were perfectly pointed, arranged by shades in a wooden stand for children who didn't want to dig for their favorite color in a box. I took three on the edge out of their slots and wedged them into my pocket when my mother was talking to the cashier, and then slumped against her side to show my boredom and eagerness to move on.

"You took something," I heard, startled. The cashier was staring at me from across the counter, her mouth slightly parted to reveal the gap between her front teeth.

Still clutched in my fingers, the crayons were warm. To get away from her eyes, I crouched down and wormed the colors from my pocket. Flecks of red and cerulean made a canvas of my palm, and I stared at them as I stood. My eyes met my mother's as I laid them flat on the counter, and her face seemed to recede into the fluorescent lights behind her. Contrast, like an eclipse, turned my gaze to my feet.

I had never been caught before and perhaps had grown too confident in my daylight crimes. The woman placed the crayons back in their arrangement, vertical, and spaced in quarter-inches, and I heard the brush of fabric as she wiped her hands on her pants. My mother acted as if nothing had happened and said, “We’d better go,” guiding my left shoulder away from the kiosk. In the changed light, I saw her paled face, her eyebrows still raised as if fear had caught her along with me.

We did not speak, and she did not spank me as she would have had I misbehaved at home. I don’t think we spoke to each other until we got back to the car, and I don’t remember apologizing in response to any questions from her. It was an assumed anomaly, as far as she knew, for I loved drawing at the time, and perhaps she blamed my attempted thievery on my need for fresh colors. My silence spoke of my knowledge of wrongdoing, and I pinched my side quick and hard in punishment of my carelessness as I sat in the backseat with my arms crossed. Of course the cashier would have noticed three missing crayons—it was no haphazard bunch of grapes.

Once, still five or six, I pocketed a toy airplane and two big-stoned rings at Décor, a party supply store Downtown, while my mother picked out streamers for my baby brother's birthday. I had wandered over, alone, to the aisle of party-favor bins with its rows and rows of metallic and multi-colored toys: kazoos, plastic-bead necklaces, bouncy balls, tiaras, and pirate eye patches. And they were all just sitting there, unmonitored and en masse, waiting to be stuffed in piñatas or handed out in gift bags or picked up by little fingers.

At home, I had baby dolls and Barbies and a Little Tykes kitchen complete with plastic hamburgers and eggs-over-easy. I didn’t need anything, certainly not a blue- and orange-airplane half the size of my palm. The rings? Maybe I did want the rings—but not enough to

wear them. I hid them in my pink Caboodle along with hair ties and nail polish and never slid the pink ring onto my finger or sent the plane soaring into my brother's cereal. I didn't steal for the use of the things; I couldn't have worn the ring and seen it as a thrill—it would have been a reminder of guilt, something I knew was wrong but did anyway. And I certainly didn't steal so that I would get attention or rebel for rebellion's sake; I never let anyone see what I stole, never bragged to my friends about what I got away with. Simply, the stealing was easy—except under surveillance—and my pockets were big.

My thievery peaked at six. I admired a bracelet at the mall: an expandable gold beauty with burgundy and plum stones. I had never had a bracelet like that before; it was grown-up, elusive, refined—something royalty would wear. I was alone in a jewelry and fashion store made for girls—girly girls who wore dangling earrings and faux diamond rings and hot pink berets—and I was drawn to what hung from pegs in shimmering abundance. When my mother called from the exit to move on, I brushed my hand against my bottom and met her outside with a pucker in my back pocket.

The bracelet simmered for two years in a blue Barbie locker, locked, displayed on the hutch above my dresser. I opened it, bedroom door closed late in the evening, only when I had to prove to myself that it was still there—my stolen bracelet—and remind myself of the reason for guilt. Unlike the small toys or grapes, worth pennies and dimes, the bracelet was gold, both in appearance and in mental value. It was a physical reminder of my too-eager hands, and even though it was hidden, it was more prominent than anything else in that room. The blue contrasted with the yellow walls and white dresser, highlighting the presence of my most significant and expensive take. I thought *guilt* every time I saw it. And guilt, I found, is what can drive the

never-to-be-known into the open, as if guilt is the substance that forces volcanoes to ultimately erupt.

One evening, I asked my mother to come to my room. She sat on the floor beside me, anticipating another bit of gossip from the girls at school, as I sat with the locker between my crossed legs. Several times, she had asked why I had stopped using the locker for my Barbies, nodding to it with her eyes while she stacked my clean underwear in the top drawer of the dresser. "It's too big for them," I would reply, and smooth the creases on my bedspread as I watched her work.

That night, I took off the lock as she waited with her hands clasped in the crook where her crossed legs met, her eyes bright in grin. Without first explaining, I handed her the bracelet, its ten-dollar tag still attached and dangling from a short, white thread.

"Where did you get this?" She cupped it in her hand and lost her smile.

"I stole it." I started crying. "Two years ago."

"We have to take it back." She shook her head, a slow unfolding of disbelief. It was so unlike me, she said, but again she didn't slap or spank me. We cried together, ashamed, and she made me promise never to do it again. I promised, and rubbed my eyes on her jeans as I lay collapsed with my head on her lap. No more guilt for things I didn't need.

As punishment, I had to return it to the store. I was shaking, of course, squeezing the bracelet in my palm as I peered over the counter at the smiling woman. I placed the bracelet next to the register, and it settled onto the glass, its stones still foggy from my grasp.

"I accidentally took this. I'm sorry."

She looked confused and said, "Okay."

Without my mother by my side, with no one to prod me for further explanation, I turned

then and left the store. I left the woman confused, as I imagine she examined the bracelet and the outdated tag and style; it was a passé fashion brought back from dreaded clearance bins. Perhaps she hung on “accidentally,” the only word I could find to account for my actions. But what child accidentally takes a bracelet, when the act took the purposeful slip into a pocket? I wondered what she’d do with it. Sell it? Send it back to the company if she found no record of its product number in the computer? Did it end up on some other girl’s wrist and feel the sweat of skin, as it never did with me? Most of all, I tried to let the humiliation replace the guilt. The locker was no longer full of a secret, and I never locked it again.

My neighborhood was comfortable, quiet, with no stop signs except for the intersections with the more major streets. Hutchinson, located in south-central Kansas, is home to salt mines, the Kansas Cosmosphere, and the Kansas State Fair. All in all, it’s your common Midwest middle-class town with modest attractions and modest people. My parents grew up there, three of my grandparents grew up there, and most of my great-grandparents grew up in or around Hutchinson. I could go back further, but the roots are self-evident. My family lives and works in the working class like much of Hutchinson, and disturbances bubble up in the home but not on the street.

My parents both worked until the time I started school and my brother was a year old. Until Tom was born, my eighty-something Great Grandma Jackson watched me during the day. Often we would put dining-room chairs in the middle of the living-room and do calisthenics along with an exercise program on television. She was nimble for her age, and I wanted to be a gymnast, with limber legs for splits and flips. When the program was over, we’d either put blankets over the chairs and make a fort or pop an umbrella over a beach blanket in a sunspot on

the yellow shag, pretending we were sunbathing on a beach somewhere.

I remember spending time individually with each grandparent and uncle, often at the mall or their respective homes, but the only vivid memories I have of myself with both of my parents are located at Sirloin Stockade, a restaurant where we shared chicken-fried-steak dinners at least once a month. Otherwise, my father worked all day as a printer during the week, and my mother worked various hours at a hamburger place until she quit to stay home and babysit part-time. It's striking to me now that I don't remember any home-time with my parents, only Texas Toast and bowls of country gravy. I don't remember those early family dinners or evenings on the couch watching television, but I do remember walks with my mother, down 30<sup>th</sup> Street and back, sometimes in a red plastic wagon, and I do remember sitting in the driver's seat of my father's Challenger while he washed it, his aviator sunglasses overwhelming my nose.

I don't remember them together. The memories are all split.

There were several inches of snow on the ground the day in January 2001 when 143 million cubic feet of compressed natural gas seeped to the surface from a leak in a nearby storage "jug" at Yaggy field. The gas sank down and traveled underground over several days before rising to the surface through old salt wells, one of which was under Décor. A sudden release of natural gas set Décor and the neighboring Woody's Appliance store ablaze and blew out the windows of nearby businesses.

The news spread fast, and I gathered with my friends in the upstairs hallway between classes at the high school. We watched the smoke rise from Downtown, several miles southwest, and were giddy from the excitement of explosions in our small town. But once I learned of the businesses involved—so familiar to me—the excitement turned to sadness, and I couldn't help

but think of the things I had taken from the store. Those small favors, balloons, streamers, greeting cards, confetti—everything had now been stolen by flames powered, or initiated, by natural gas that had seeped under Hutchinson and found a crack up to the surface. There were no celebratory fireworks rising from the party favors—only ashes and more gas, seeping, rising.

Fifteen gas blowholes sprung around the town, and that evening, fountains like geysers formed a few miles east of the Downtown fires. Fountains of gas, some thirty feet high, bubbled from abandoned brine wells, and the next day the gas found one of these brine wells under a mobile home park. Two people died when the gas reached their mobile home, expanded, and exploded, under invisible pressure.

Beyond my thievery, startling, though possibly normal, actions came out of me. There were little bursts of fury: biting a boy on the back, pinching my brother's big cheeks until they were pink, purposefully falling out of bed in the night to create a "thud" and make my mother come running. I even tried to push my brother down the basement stairs in his walker. My mother caught him just in time and screamed *Why would you do that?* at me a dozen times. I didn't know.

All I know is that sometimes I had impulses to steal or bite or injure, impulses that tended to be acted upon and then regretted. I know now that my mother was depressed and bulimic when I was young, and that my father didn't want children and didn't really want anything to do with his wife. I know now that the fighting started early on, but I don't remember it. I don't remember the fighting until I was eleven or twelve, when I began to feel responsible for what went on in the house, from protecting my brother to trying to mediate my parents' screaming. But those negative emotions in the home when I was young, whether I remember them or not,

were there: the tension between my parents; the burden of me, the first-born, when they had to work so many hours; the pressure to make it work because that was expected.

I have never forgotten my moments of thievery, never needed to find them written down anywhere to know of their place in my past. I have been a thief. I have taken to fill my pockets and drawers and containers with things I didn't want but knew I could take without notice. But those small things I stole don't fill all that missing space in my memory, the lost days as a family. And I was the one who felt guilty.

The stealing stopped. Not even a grape or an extra yogurt sample. The little locker remained empty, unlocked. The shock of confession over my stolen bracelet, the guilt of secrecy and thievery, prevented me from ever desiring that thrill again. No more rebellion, even for my own sake. I became conservative, even righteous. I didn't bite, didn't curse, didn't push. My mother slapped me out of frustration when I began asserting myself about rearranging and remodeling the house, building playhouses in the backyard, and converting the garage into my own apartment. I was only argumentative, insistent, about altering my surroundings, and my parents finally let me paint my room blue and put up blinds.

I stopped the stealing but not the *taking*. I began pointing at everything I wanted, little nods from my forefinger at things large, small, and abstract. As I walked in a store or down a street, my arm swinging at my side, I'd lift my index finger lazily, so as to not draw attention to the act of pointing, in the direction of something I wished I owned. It was a way for me to make a mental collection of everything I would have if I could. This ranged from cars to squirrels to pillows to cassettes to kisses, miniature and grand, cheap and costly. I was no longer limited to what would fit in my pocket, and I didn't need to feel guilty about taking things that I would never actually possess. I admitted it to no one. I just pointed and kept gathering. I mentally

gathered until I was in middle school and found something legal and tangible to collect and hoard—this time openly with my mother’s approval: Backstreet Boys memorabilia.

A week after the Downtown explosion, my father drove us all to see the damage. We parked across the street from where Décor used to stand and climbed to the top of an adjacent parking garage to see what remained: a little leftover rubble and a flame.

The city of Hutchinson had installed pipes around town to release the natural gas. They were skinny silver poles with flames on top, where the vapor turned into fire when it reached the surface. They drilled near the geysers, drilled in town, outside town, drilled thirty-six wells to release what was stored and seeping beneath the surface. Eight, including the one Downtown, actually hit gas and began burning off. And the flames burned, some of them, for a year: releasing the gas, releasing the pressure and the stress of small spaces.

I tried, without success, to find the little airplane, the rings, as a kind of memorial, an apology. These things—all those things I took—should have gone up in Décor’s flames, not boiled slowly in hidden drawers, not molded with my name.

## Within the Frame

*Space has a spiritual equivalent and can heal what is divided and burdensome in us.*  
--Gretel Ehrlich, "The Solace of Open Spaces"

Eager for the sun, the first thing I'd do in the morning was open the blinds. If I could reach from bed, I'd yank the cord far and hard until the sky became visible behind the neighbor's roof and dust fluttered down from the slats. The flood of sunlight washed the bluish walls into violet. The dandelion shag showed its true color. And I'd lie there in the morning sun and wish my bedroom were on a second or fifth story in a mountain village somewhere not in Kansas.

Sometimes I'd even leave the blinds open at night if the moon was bright and on my side of the sky. I'd try to angle my head on the pillow so the light would shine on my face. Some quality about the moon made it all right—perhaps the way nothing could hide, not the pits nor the peaks. Looking out at blackness and finding that one white spot seemed like the ultimate anti-anxiety pill. Only it was something you couldn't swallow. It seeped in smoothly on its own to soothe.

Through my one set of double windows, my daylight view of the two elm trunks and neighbors' houses was unchanged from the first times I remember leaning on my windowsill soaking in the green tint of pre-thunderstorm air. But I had to bend to feel it. Unclear as to how to paint window frames properly—or perhaps wrong in painting them in the first place—every time my mother and I applied a new coat, we altered the anatomy of each window. The one on the right, painted stiff, took all my upper body strength to open. Centimeter by centimeter, it crept up in starts to where I could reach in and open the screen. The other held on to the sill for an extra half-second before jolting open with a sudden squeak. Yet, no matter how many times I pried them open, neither ever made it easier on me. They made me work for my breeze. For a clean breath.

Then if it was light outside when I took a shower, even if it was dim, I'd open the bathroom window's blinds and shower in the natural shadows. I've always detested artificial light in the day—fake, bright light when the sun's right there. But the sun can't always reach where it needs to be. Not all bathrooms have windows, and not all windows let the sun in. If there's one thing that determines the mood of a home, it's the windows. It's the ratio between the enclosed and the exposed to the outside. It's the measure and length of light getting through to the corners of the rooms. More than anything, the windows define.

Windows define rooms, moods, and chapters of lives. I've been in countless classrooms over the years. Most have been square or rectangle with white, sometimes painted-cinder-block, walls. And most have had windows. I remember the rooms at Morgan Elementary School in Hutchinson, Kansas. Thick, teal curtains hung above the windows that concealed the upper three quarters of one wall, pooling at the top of the radiators. In the hot months, August in particular, we'd open them as soon as we got in the classroom: eight-year-olds on their tippy-toes tugging at levers. The school didn't have air conditioning then—not even little fans—so all we could do was hope the wind blew through some shade before lifting the corners of our pages. We relied on those windows for the movement of air, for the view of the playground, and for the flies the boys would catch in their cupped hands.

I live in a five-hundred-forty-square-foot, one bedroom apartment in Lawrence, Kansas. I rented it sight unseen, having viewed only a floor plan online, because I was running out of time to find a place. It looked good in drawing: large patio with a wide front window overlooking it, same size wide window at the back in the bedroom, and bonus third-side window over the kitchen sink. Ah, a sink window! But I've lived here for nine months—I've covered every

season—and never, ever does any stream of sunlight land on my floors. If I happen to wake when the sun is peeking between two buildings, I see spots of sun on the wall behind my bed. But then they travel back into the corner and are gone. There's an overhang above, and walls on either side, of my patio, and they all face north, so all of those angles, too, block any position of the sun from pointing a ray or two in my front window's direction. It's almost noon right now, and if I weren't on this computer, if I happened to be writing this down while sitting on my couch, I would have to turn on a lamp. A lamp. At noon. I recently bought a mirror to hang on the wall adjacent to the window so the light that does come in would reflect and make the space feel brighter (a trick I heard on HGTV). It doesn't work.

The brightest room is the kitchen because light reflects off the wall of the building six feet from the window over the sink, and, sometimes, I work standing at the kitchen counter for the brightness. But my cat's favorite daytime spot is my bedroom windowsill. She can see birds, as well as men throwing Frisbees to their dogs on the small patch of green in between cement walls. She's not in the sun—not directly—but she'll sit there for hours just watching, just dreaming about lying in the grass or pouncing a bird. Cats love spots of sun—those big spots that warm the floor and nearly make it sweaty to sit in. I've never met a cat that didn't sprawl out, purring, in a warm ray of sun. I've even seen some follow it across the room, every ten minutes stretching over a few feet to resume. Sunlight is good for a cat's coat and keeps her warm when the temperature drops in her sleeping body. Yet, my Snickers is missing out on coat-shining time because there are no sun beams on my floors. I don't get to see her squint her golden eyes up at the sky while I rub her heated belly. And *I* am missing out on cheer-time, sweaty-floor-skin time, because I can't sit in the direct sunlight in any spot or corner in this apartment.

I can't breathe in this place. I can't think. The breezes from the open window are full of

shade, and I want the heat.

I watch hours of HGTV. One Monday, they ran a marathon of "House Hunters: International." People with millions in their pockets searched for homes on the beach or in the center of a metropolis. I was struck that a millionaire could be shown a 5,000 square-foot luxury home that any girl from Kansas couldn't imagine even considering and reject it because it didn't have a "view." They will sacrifice space, frills, travertine, and money for a cityscape or ocean view.

At first I thought they were ridiculous for being so caught up on the view when the house was otherwise perfect, but, then, I think I am the same. I would surrender my dream of having a study if I could face my desk and couch at a scene that isn't a parking lot or the side of a building. If the sun would light my page. If I had the option of going out on a patio soaked in sunshine and landscape. Take my five-hundred-and-forty square feet, put it on a shore or a mountain side, cut out walls of windows on all sides, and I'd be satisfied. Give me a view. Give me rooms with sun and views.

Several years ago, I spent a few days in Austria. I was traveling through Europe on a tour with forty or so others, and the guide assigned us to rooms and roommates as we waited outside the hotel with our suitcases. The hotel was in a little town, Tulfes, outside Innsbruck, high up in the Alps. With our room keys in hand, we all made our way up to the second-floor. Three of us set our suitcases down on the twin beds in a small central room. Seconds later, we heard excited yelps from down the hall and went to see for ourselves just why. Four women received the room at the end of the hall, and all were pointing at their view like an infant jabs at the music button of a toy on the side of her crib: "Look there! Again! It's mine!"

One wall was entirely windows, providing a panoramic view of the Alps across the valley. Six peaks mingled down to post-rain green and cupped little huts with red roofs. I nearly cried. For the view, for the peaks, the mounting clouds of the coming storm, the green covering the ground, the most beautiful (and first real) mountains I had ever slept in.

Instead of sulking or rudely sitting on one of their beds to gasp, as I would have liked, I walked down to the church next door. The cemetery behind it extended to an unobstructed viewpoint of the mountains—more than six peaks—and I stood there in awe, in the open, above and below the town, fully overwhelmed and completely calm. I could have lived there on the edge of that cemetery for the rest of my life and written and smiled and sometimes cried.

From the fenced ledge, I watched the shadows of clouds darken the mountainsides, and stayed into the pouring rain.

I passed a lot of time in my bedroom growing up. It was the smallest room in the house, but I stuffed a twin size bed, a dresser, a desk, and a stereo cabinet inside. Every four to six months, I rearranged all of the furniture. I would stand there and visually move the bed in six different positions before finally scooting it somewhere. Sometimes I would draw up a floor plan before hand. Though I didn't have very many options as to where each piece could go, I don't think I ever had any piece in the exact same place more than once. It was a puzzle with multiple answers, and I had to find them all. After having an arrangement for several months, I would have to move the furniture in order to feel somewhat sane in that room. There was a huge difference between the bed facing the window and it being set *against* the window, between the acoustics of the stereo in the corner or on the short wall, between staring at the side of my desk or my dresser.

When I was fourteen, my parents let me tear down the yellow floral wallpaper and paint the walls a sky blue. The trim went from white to a pale lime green. I also took down the ruffled yellow curtains and installed white blinds. My parents didn't understand why I wanted to change my room at such frequent whims, nor why I dreamed of converting the garage into my very own apartment or parking an RV in the backyard. I would show them my drawn conversion of the garage, complete with paint chips and furniture. I was serious. Meanwhile, all of the walls in the rest of the house remained an ivory white or the original wallpaper, which in every instance was some version of floral stripes. And all of the furniture stayed rooted to its carpet indentations, as dust and cat hair collected around the feet and floorboards.

The dining room was open to the living room but in its own square area. Our dining table was rectangle and set perpendicular to the back sliding doors. Occasionally, I would angle the table at forty-five degrees or a full ninety. The change was refreshing. I could sit on my usual right side of the table and, instead of the kitchen, I could face the sliding doors to the backyard and count the birds in the bushes by the fence. I'd wait to see my father's reaction when he came home from work to find the table angled or the living room couch repositioned. The change would last several minutes to several days, but never longer than that. My mother would ask me if the table were perfectly straight after she moved it back.

I remodeled the kitchen and the bathroom. I finished the basement. I still have the plans I drew. I tore up the imitation wood carpet in the kitchen, chipped off the mildewed tile in the shower, and sealed the leaks downstairs. I chose paint colors for each room: sunny yellow for the bathroom, a cool earth tone for the living area. The shag went back where it came from, and I put down mahogany floors.

I explained these plans to my parents until they rolled their eyes again in their same “darn, Kari has another idea to change the house” way. A decade later, and I’m still ripping out their shag, throwing away their curtains, painting over their white. And it’s all still only in my mind.

It’s one month into spring, and while the temperatures are touching eighty, the breeze is still cool. Yet, all around me, the aggressive hum of air conditioners is already coming and going. When I have my windows open, I have to turn the volume on the television up to fifty because otherwise I can’t hear. I remember the hum of my childhood home, but it was a combination of low whirrings and little vibrations from the various fans running at once: a box fan in front of the open screen door, a little space fan slowly vibrating in circles on my desk, a rotating fan on my parents’ dresser pointed at their bed. They set the air conditioner to come on at eighty and always turned it off at night. Somehow, even with the multiple points of moving air, the house always felt stale, heavy, stifling.

When my father got home from work around five, he’d go straight to his room and come out in white cotton tennis shorts—top button undone—and shirtless. His skin was whiter than mine, but his arms were pink from all the bike riding. He would move the box fan to the living room, direct it on his spot on the couch, and watch crime shows or the Science Fiction channel for the rest of the night. My mother kept her sweatpants and baggy tee’s on until bedtime, but the back ring of her collar was a sweat-stained yellow, matching the kitchen countertop where she stood cutting coupons or writing romances in a spiral notebook.

In my room, door shut, lights off, I’d lie in a sports bra and shorts with the music on. The bed was damp with sweat, as usual, so I’d reposition at least my legs every few minutes to let the

fan cool the sheets. Hours on that bed, reaching over intermittently to change the CD, reading an issue of *Teen Beat* or my library copy of *A Family Apart* by Joan Lowery Nixon for the fourth time. And then a voice from the living room would break the quiet in the lull of a song. A barrage of shouts, a reply of unintelligible yells. A boom into the wall. A slammed door.

My muscles tensed. My finger shot to the pause button.

I empathize with surgeons operating in rooms without windows. Dr. Richard Selzer should be able to see those cows, that pasture, the stars at night when he operates. He wants and needs to create, or carve, with access to the sky. His “carpentry” is a living body; my carpentry is a living language.<sup>9</sup> So why should I, like Dr. Selzer, have to stare at walls when I write? I put my stethoscope to the page, my own “ever-asking Y,” and try to pen it all down, but here, in this apartment, there’s no connection to anything celestial.<sup>10</sup>

Writing, for me, is trying to answer the why’s, and a lot of those why’s stem from my childhood. I can think of the things to say, but not how to say them. Then I think I’ve answered some of the why’s, but they don’t translate onto the page. And when I can’t see them, see answers spelled out in print, in sentences, then I don’t believe them. Therefore, I’m left in my windowless, sunless operating room, dissecting my life without a sunbeam to light my cuts.

I haven’t been on many airplanes, but the few flights I’ve taken have shown me that, yes, Kansas does look like a poorly made quilt from above, and the honey roasted peanuts are indeed tasty. By luck or by trade, I have managed to get a window seat on at least one leg of each trip. From the moment of takeoff until we were surrounded by clouds, my eyes have never left the view from my window. Being so high, having such views, was liberating. In the air, I was above

it all. I could see everything perfectly from that little window, and even if the sun wasn't visible on my side, I could see its effects on the ground and on the clouds and on the blue. The view from a plane was the ultimate window, ever changing. Looking out over the German peaks of the Alps, no one could have convinced me that there were less than twenty feet between the sides of the plane and miles to fall before we grounded. There were no boundaries from that seat—only the pesky wing that kept getting in the way.

I could write in the sky. I put down the fold-out dining tray and could think. If only there had been a breeze in my face and not the mini-blast of airplane air conditioning that kept icing my grip on the pen.

The oven in this apartment is old, rusty, and smells of burnt cheese. The bottom has patches of black: raised, burnt blobs of dropped food. I've scraped it out, wiped it up, sprayed Glade air freshener, but every time I cook something the smoke alarm goes off. Snickers bolts from whatever chair she's on and hides underneath anything that's low to the ground. It blears until I find the footstool and stretch up to it on my toes, holding down the button for up to thirty seconds. I press it longer than necessary to prevent it from coming back on in short, intermittent beeps, forty seconds in between. But the cat stays in hiding for an indefinite length of time. Eventually, I have to go peek under chairs and the bed until I see her white chin and coax her out. "It's okay, Snicks. I turned it off."

When my parents fought, they would *fight*, become bigger than their frames and lash limbs and objects at the other's head. At any moment, a lamp could cannon across the room, or cat food could be thrown into half-eaten soup. My father could pin my mother on the floor, his forearm pressed up to her chin; my mother could shove my father into a corner so the shadowbox

with miniature figurines would fall with him. But, constant, was the short, loud burst of my father's voice or the more frequent sobbing-screaming of my mother. When I was young, I'd cover my head with a pillow and try to suffocate their voices, but since they were on the other side of the wall, all it did was muffle everything. Once I got my stereo, I'd turn up the music loud so that's all I heard and so they could hear it, too. With my face in front of the speaker, I'd sing. I'd sing my songs and pause with the music to listen for words in the hall. But I was trapped, trapped in my room until the shouting stopped. And then longer because there were always more bursts of shouts after the barrage.

No one came to get me, to tell me it was okay. If my mother came in, she was crying and cursing my father. If my father came in, he was telling me to do something about my mother. The alarm kept going off, and no one would stand there pushing the button long enough for it to cease. The beeps kept coming back. So I stayed in my square and tried to rearrange the space in my head, using the double-window as the point from which all arrangements centered.

Back then, I believed in God. And I prayed. I prayed the Lord's Prayer on my knees, looking out the window at the sky. Then I sat in a sunspot on the floor and continued singing, waiting for it to be over.

I thought I wanted to be an interior designer, but I never made it past HGTV and pages upon pages of my own pink-inked dream floor plans. I once drew the plans for a house on a two-by-three-foot posterboard. I gave it ten bedrooms (each with an attached bathroom), three living areas, a central courtyard, and a kitchen with skylights. While my ideal dream home had multiple levels, I decided I couldn't draw more than one floor and, thus, kept it at one massive living space, equaling, if my math was right, eleven-thousand-square-feet. The home was surrounded

by clusters of trees and flowers, with peaks beyond, pink arrow tips in my drawing, and windows every few feet. I never dreamed of moving my family there, though; I just fantasized my own life.

It wasn't about the ten bedrooms or the cozy chair around every corner but about options. In a house like that, I could migrate to any room for any reason, choose to spend Sunday afternoon in the east side den and Thursday morning on a courtyard bench. And, of course, every room had windows with views. With space and views, I knew I would never feel trapped. The ability to create a space for myself on paper or physically rearrange my furniture kept me believing in change, and the sun or moon lighting my pillow through one of those windows kept me sane, tied to something heavenly.

But because I couldn't imagine combining colors and textures for clients, I chose the writing life instead of designing. I just couldn't make paint tell a story nor the angle of tables answer the why's. But that doesn't mean my environment is any less important to me now than it was back then. In these first nine months in this apartment, I've rearranged the living room five times. I refuse to give up trying to make it cozy or make up for the lack of light. I think I've finally found an arrangement that works—sort of—with the white, white walls as open as possible and a few more feet of floor space. But I can't move anything in my bedroom because of my queen-size bed, and it frustrates me to no end. There's no chance of direct moonlight at three a.m. to calm me.

Maybe next time I'll find an apartment—or, even better, a house—on a hill, with both east- and west-facing windows. Maybe it will overlook a pool or a garden. Maybe I'll set my couch in a room with enough sunshine at noon so I won't need a lamp. And maybe, just maybe, I'll have a sunbeam on my floor, all warm, and get sweaty, sprawled out writing.

## The Condition

*They tell how it was, and how time  
came along, and how it happened  
again and again. They tell  
the slant life takes when it turns  
and slashes your face as a friend.  
Any wound is real.*

--William Stafford, "Scars"

I spend a good amount of my days with delicate books, running my fingers over their gilt or embossed boards, sewing my way through their pages. Careful not to break the spine, to open it further than necessary, I peak into a book's past. I am a book detective, like Johnny Depp in *The Ninth Gate*, only minus the meeting with the devil and the fact that he hunts down and deals with *hundred-thousand-dollar* books. As an appraiser, I evaluate books by condition and value on a smaller scale, deal them the fate of a number and grade before turning them over to those who peruse online bookselling sites.

The books I know show their age. They sag in the spine, curl in at the corners, chip at the edges, wrinkle under the cloth. They have worn gilt titles or rubbed illustrations, black outlined flowers with faded petals. In some, their hinges hang exposed, showing their bones and ripping the muscle that works them open, closed. Spine ends fray, edges show dents from dropping, and page corners bend from the fingers that have turned them, read them, needed them, loved them. Books, whether one or one hundred years old, are evidence of their own histories.

To do my job, I have to know a book's history, both internal and external. I check each page for notations and keep track of how many of what kind. My thumb runs over thousands of pages a day, and the eyes now know, after four years of this, the hint of a pencil mark on a page seen for a split second. The eyes detect anything non-type—highlighting, underlining, checkmark, question mark, stain—as they constantly assess the state of the page.

On front free endpapers I read inscriptions from fathers or aunts or dear friends, summed up by the year. In cursive, mostly, they speak of the care put into the purchase and giving of a book. Some of these inscriptions are in pencil, century-old lead cursive names or dates or prices. I have erased these pencil inscriptions and felt guilty for it, for erasing any known rhetorical history (perhaps a century old) and the knowledge of the intent of a previous owner or giver. Believe me, I would leave them be if I could, but the fact is that fewer marks mean more value. Most buyers don't want evidence of any other owner: more value comes with the illusion of new, unused, and unowned.

Even without ownership marks, environment affects paper and boards. Holding a book in my hand, I know from its shape, texture, and condition of the paper how it has been kept: shelved vertically or horizontally, jammed in a bag, carried in strong hands, displayed behind glass, or stored in a dank basement. I know if it has been exposed to smoke and moisture, sun and pressure. Its previous homes are self-evident and permanent: boards bend, edges scuff, cloth fades, and pages change color. And most of the antique books are foxed, dotted with orange-red across the pages, endpapers, and sometimes boards. It's where high humidity has made its mark, or a fungus has spread across the paper, or, in certain papers, it's the oxidation of iron or copper in the pulp from which the paper was made.

There is no going back.

The walls of my parents' basement are foxed, too. Out from the air vent near the ceiling, the foxing tracks across the white walls. Across the shelved twenty-eight volume set of the *Young Student's Learning Library*. Across the drawing of a cat in a basket of flowers that my mother colored with crayons in the 80s and taped to the wall, and foxing across its beige, blank sky. Two watercolor prints of ships at sea, framed by small molding and posted before my

parents bought the home, still sail, yet they are covered by foxing that breaks the boundaries of the borders. The foxing is probably due to the flooding the basement has suffered on numerous occasions, from a few zones. One of which is the corner directly under the crack at the start of the garage above, the crack where several snakes have called home next to our front door. A bull snake, big and black, evidently wasn't large enough to clog the hole in the foundation during heavy rains, or perhaps that is how it died and was soon replaced by another, smaller snake. There were a few other outlets for flooding in the back of the basement, the unfinished part with the decommissioned bicycles and washer and dryer. Water would creep over the cement and tiled floor, and one time it rose to at least an inch, requiring a full night of filling buckets, hauling them outside to dump them, only to see some of that water filter back down into the basement. Oh, the cycle of flooding. And oh what water can do. I like to imagine those ancient ships were put there as a joke from the previous owner who knew about the flooding, as if to give a subtle warning of the water that would rise below the prints from time to time.

My parents care little for decorating and haven't changed a thing about the home since 1982 when they moved in. The basement is covered in wood paneling and built-in shelves and even a dry bar that my brother and I wanted to turn into an actual small kitchen. Until my brother and I filled the basement with Little Tykes, books, Barbies, and tractors, it was all storage, finished to unfinished, paneled to open studs. I don't know why my father didn't consider turning it into a "man cave," cut off from light and frills and women and children, but now, at the age of twenty, my brother has taken that turn, at least in part, occupying a section of the basement with his futon, large LCD TV, PlayStation 2, and mini-refrigerator stocked with twelve kinds of drinks. Still surrounding his makeshift apartment is a plastic shelving unit with dusty Hot Wheels and, on the other side, a warped yellow bookcase that was once in my childhood

room. The plaid contact paper on the inside of the bookcase peels, unsticks on its own, and foxing has claimed it, too, climbing up the back panel like ants on food left out in the weather.

The foxing is only one sign of the decay: the floorboards are warped; the main floor carpet is the original yellow shag, mostly matted down; the upstairs bathroom fixtures are corroded, eaten brown around the shower knobs. And the bathroom has no carpet, just the boards underneath, caked in baby powder and decayed where water has trickled down from the tub. Foxing, surprisingly, hasn't crept across the bathroom walls, but that may be because my father and I painted them in 1995, possibly too thick or sunshine yellow for the spots to show through.

If you go to a home-improvement store these days, you'll find all types of paint and primer. There's paint with stain-blocker, low VOC, low odor, no-VOC. You'll find self-leveling paint, anti-microbial paint, ceiling paint that goes on violet and turns to bright white after fifteen minutes so you can see if you've missed any spots. And then there is special paint for bathrooms, kitchens, and basements that is moisture- and mildew-resistant: paint for prevention.

Among the things that we collect, we can count the sun and miles. Feet carry us, some more than others, on and on through streets, hallways, and stairwells, and every time we step into the sun we gather and keep it in our skin. Our knowledge of the sun's effects is ever present in the news and in health care articles: *Protect yourself from the sun*. It's the anthem we are told to live by, but in a surface-driven society, the warnings generally go unheeded.

My mother used to have frosted skin like mine, fair to the point of mockery. In the one home video of my family, on my second birthday, she glides around from aunt to uncle, me in tow, in a fitted polo and khakis, with smooth, evenly fair skin and lipstick. Her dark hair, short then, too, forms a wave over the crest of her forehead: simple but fitting. She is twenty-seven, a

babysitter for four neighborhood siblings, and an occasional concession worker at the sports arena in town. She looks healthy, confident, and even happy. I wish I could remember her then.

It was a slow change. After all of the walking around town with my brother and me, and especially when she stopped working and driving, her face has changed shape and color and texture. She has walked, and her face has turned a murky red. Her skin illustrates its wear, its time in the sun, and the thousands of trips down 30<sup>th</sup> Street to the grocery store. Her dimples have disappeared, and her whole face is in shadow. And the tanned ruddiness is interrupted by still small but evident sun spots, solar lentigos, all over her cheeks, nose, and forehead. When she stopped working, stopped dressing for others, she also stopped the make-up and neglected to start the sunscreen habit. Sun spots, which most people refer to as “age spots” appear as we age, as our skin’s natural ability to defend itself from UV rays deteriorates. But they don’t just start when we’re older: we accumulate sun damage until the buildup shows on the surface in the form of flat, brown discolorations.

Just as I don’t remember my mother’s fair skin, I cannot see my face without freckles, a smaller, earlier, and more frequent form of sun damage. Freckles appear when skin is damaged by the sun, when the pigment-producing cells in the skin, melanocytes, are damaged. They are abnormal collections of melanin pigment, resting on the epidermis, the top layer of skin. They cover (not thickly) my cheeks, nose, shoulders, and arms. There is even one on my lip, one on the inside of the middle finger on my left hand. Unlike sun spots, however, freckles can be attractive (think Julianne Moore and Molly Ringwald), which is a feat for anything labeled “damage.” But looking in the mirror now, I can see that not all of the dark spots on my face are freckles—some are just grey pigment without the name. Not brown like freckles and too early to be labeled age spots—somewhere in between, perhaps.

Freckles and these other spots share space with scars I've gathered from over a decade of acne. I've always touched my face (chin resting on a palm, the inability not to pick at a blemish, the urge to massage tired temples), but I don't blame my dirty fingers. I blame the bacteria deep inside, the oil, the hormones, and the internal stress.

I didn't have the acne that they scare you with at the dermatologist: mountains of red all over and down. But I did have (and still have) it bad enough, in clusters and fits, to scar. All over, but especially the cheeks, the temples, the chin. Ideally, acne should not be a typical symptom of puberty, and it definitely should not continue on well into your twenties. No marked girl can admit to a life without envy of the woman with perfect skin, smooth and blemish-free. The desire for perfection starts before we know it: Yes, that girl there, I'd like her skin, please. Oh, you're selling pimple-erasers? Give me a dozen. I'll try anything. What? You sell make-up that fights acne and covers it at the same time? That's too good to be true.

And, for me, it was. I began wearing foundation to cover it all up—the sporadic and varied dots of red, brown, and grey caked over by liquid that was supposed to be the color of my skin. But the foundation that cloaked the acne made it worse, clogging my pores. And, who am I kidding, it never hid it, just showed I had something to hide because there were peachy, swollen bumps all over my face.

After all the worrying about how to get rid of the acne, the trouble becomes the scarring. Each blemish doesn't instantly fade to nothing: it fades to a red dot its size but level with my skin. How will it fade from there? Once it's there, like foxing, isn't it there forever? I hear there are procedures you can go through for scars and sun spots. Do I hate my face enough to have a procedure? Though I care for my face with minerals and moisturizer with sunscreen now, mostly, the spots are still there, some raised and some flat, and the worry is that they will

continue to spread, accumulate, deepen, and darken into the face of my mother.

In grade school, all of the students would occasionally congregate for an assembly in the gym/cafeteria for awards, music performances, D.A.R.E., or guest speakers. We sat cross-legged with our classmates next to our class's assigned assembly number on the wall. Two rows, as neatly as possible, per class. One assembly in the spring of fourth grade featured a speaker that horrified and saddened us all. We sat transfixed as she told the story of how she was burned. She was in the kitchen bent over the sink when the gas oven exploded and seared her body. Her face, neck, and hands, the only skin showing, skewed in stretched patterns. Portions of skin loomed swollen, shiny, pink. Her voice was muffled, blown away, and she couldn't smile like I could. I clasped my hands in fear of both her and the silent gas.

I went home and thought I smelled gas for months, as I traced phantom odors from the basement to the perimeter of the house, fright leading me with no beginning and no end. I told my father to find the leak. Nothing. The woman's scars, reminders of a silent seepage and explosion, petrified me. Scars are snags you can't always prevent, like the raised, white chicken pox scars on my stomach and sides from when I was five, or the scars left from the skin cancer removed from my grandfather's nose, forehead, and ears. My mother's father, he liked to brag about never having acne or breakouts, attributing it to the fact that he *never* touched his face. Never, he said, just like he never had a drink of alcohol in all his eighty-seven years and never could quit flirting with young waitresses right in front of my grandmother.

Robert Lentz fake-tanned his shaved legs, rubbing tanning lotion from thigh to ankle with his foot propped on the coffee table. He prompted his grandchildren to look at how smooth and dark they were, even touch them. He stepped out proudly in shorts with three-inch inseams,

sneakers, and a short-sleeved button-down shirt, limping slightly due to the sciatica. My grandpa fake-tanned his shaved legs, but his face took the sun straight on. It was those years in the army, in the Pacific and Australia during World War II, that caused the cancer, and all that time spent outside caring for the cats and the lawn back home in Kansas. He walked out proudly with bandages on his nose, blood leaking through into a speck, and stacked cans of cat food into a grocery cart as my grandmother pushed.

I hold new books, still ripe with the scent of plastic wrap from the publisher. Their crispness is refreshing—the feeling of new words, worlds, all numbered and held together with glue. And their covers, I can't deny, can sometimes seduce. I know the cliché, and I won't repeat it here, but I run my fingers over beautiful covers, colors, not knowing the content or words inside and, sometimes, not caring. The covers that capture me are not generally composed of photographs or paintings but graphics, art, made specifically for setting the tone of a book. ABEbooks, an online bookselling site, recently put together a list of “30 Novels Worth Buying for the Cover Alone,” and I melted over them. Sighed even. Yes, that cover makes me want to read this novel of which I know nothing. Drawn covers. Covers built for the book. The colors, the shapes, the way they frame the title, the name. Even just the colors and shapes without a drawing. Covers move the words, carry the eyes in and through, and it's up to the words to hold their own, which they must, with covers like that.

But then there are the simple covers, the cloth or leather, which can accomplish the same sense of awe. Some embossed, some with simple titles, some tipped with paper illustrations. The lack of design can mean more than elaborate conceptual design. The rare books, the ones you have to care for with the tip of every finger, those still me. There are covers, simple cloth, I will

never forget. And it's not even the covers themselves but the collective condition of the covers that tells of something more than a simple life on a shelf.

One in particular was deep, darkened red leather, soiled as if by flames, with dark tips and edges, smudges. Soiled in a beautiful way, a way that made no excuses and clapped you before you knew what was inside, a strike of knowing. The soiling continued inside, on the endpapers, each page streaked by age and the oil of fingers, and the wrinkling in of paste once smooth. Fingertips had torn some corners and fore-edges. From the outside, the title was unknown, for the spine was worn and rubbed away. When you opened the front cover, it creaked, cracked without making worse what was already present. Names, dates, and words in pencil flanked the hinge. I turned the page past owners and beheld the work: *A Vindication on the Rights of Woman*. Mary Wollstonecraft. A 1792 First American Edition. What was already admiration for apparent longevity morphed into awe at what was in my hands. A plain, old, soiled book became a two-hundred-and-fifteen-year-old treasure of history. It suddenly felt heavier, and the grooves in the leather, more pronounced.

As I researched the book and looked at it page after page, it gained more weight. I found that Mary's name on the title page was misspelled: Woolstonecraft, two o's instead of two l's. Was this a solitary mistake? A purposeful change? A characteristic of the entire printing? Each page brought new questions. Each "None found" after searching for other copies of this edition online made it rarer. Every detail, from the misspelling to the original binding, made me surer of the fact that this book possibly held more value, both in society's history and monetarily, than any I had come across before. Foxed, aged, and soiled, where had it been these last two centuries? Whose hands held it before mine? Whose eyes had read it and learned from it? Who had changed because of it, this bound wonder from another age?

I had found the book in a cabinet in the bookstore office, the cabinet where rarities and fragile, valuable books were kept. Cataloging the content of the cabinet, I had pulled out a plump, folded-over manila envelope. It had contained one book in bubble wrap with no notes or suggestions of its origins. I later learned it had been in the cabinet, wrapped up, for several years. Before me, the owner had known what she had but not what to do with it. I revived the question, as I felt that this book deserved something more, something better than a cabinet in limbo between owners. It had an apparent but unknown history that needed to continue. It needed to gain more natural scars from use and preservation in order to continue living as a beacon from another time.

My mother leans toward the bathroom mirror, her face elongated with the oval her mouth makes. She rubs alcohol in rough circles over a blemish, burning it out. Her words are rounded when she speaks, like through a yawn, and I say she must be hurting.

“It’s better than letting it go,” she says, and briefly lifts the cotton ball to soak it in alcohol once more.

She bought me every over-the-counter acne treatment on the market when I was a teenager, and none of it worked. I hid behind baggy tees and, eventually, make-up. But I know her hurt is not on the surface. She keeps it, now, hidden behind her own sweatpants and oversized sweatshirts, but her body plagued her until I was born. Though she had never been overweight, one comment from a girl in ninth grade shut down her desire for food. This anorexia shut down her period for five years. This shut down of the body began the depression. And, as she accumulated internal aches, her face began to reflect them.

By the age of fifty, she gave up pants with zippers and buttons not because of weight but

for comfort. By the age of forty, she accepted her fully grey hair and swore never to color it. By the age of thirty-eight, she stored her glasses in her lingerie chest and carried a magnifying glass in her purse if she needed it. By the age of thirty-two, she threw away all her make-up. By the age of twenty-one, the month she met my father, her period came back.

Today, when I complain about my scars, she reminds me of her father, the way he wore bandages as signs of pride of the number of “Japs” he killed in the Pacific in World War II. When my brother and I were at his house and bored, he would show us pictures of the dead, along with trinkets he stole from their pockets. He had a kill-count, though I don’t remember it now. And as she soaks a fresh cotton ball, I can see my grandpa in her face, the way it is beginning to sag into the weight of frown.

## On the Level of This World

*[A] dash lends a certain air of surprise or emotional tone on occasion and, if used sparingly, is a useful device for adding movement, or a sense of movement, to writing. But it is rightly called a 'mark of ignorance' since some writers use it indiscriminately and far too often. This versatile mark of punctuation can be used, and perhaps too often is used, to separate, terminate, interrupt, introduce, enclose, and to indicate omission of words, figures, or letters.*

–Harry Shaw, *Punctuate it Right!*

### SEPARATION

In Memorial Park Cemetery outside Hutchinson, parked cars line the narrow, dirt roads circling the grounds. Many have started the grave decoration early on this Sunday morning before Memorial Day, as the slightly rolling land holds dots of color amid the kneeling shapes of those here to remember. I am here to do the same, accompanying my mother, father, Grandma Lentz, and Uncle Roger, though the sense of unease in this place makes me walk quicker but deliberately.

My mother and grandmother take notes of the stones without flowers.

“Nobody’s come to decorate their graves yet.” My grandmother looks over a long, barren stretch of stones.

“It’s only Sunday. There’s still the actual Memorial Day tomorrow,” my mother says, holding her bobbing purse at her side.

They comment on the plots marked with hanging flower baskets, real flowers, and mutter about the money and time those people must have to maintain the growth.

“No one here waters them, you know,” my grandmother says, now watching her step between stones.

The talk about money and status at the cemetery unnerves me, and I leave them behind to survey stones on our search for the Lentz family line. Careful not to step on the stones, burrs prick my sandaled feet as I keep to the grass. The stones here are mostly low, level with the

ground; it is a newer cemetery, and the only statuesque headstones mark the graves of babies or the Conklin family, the town's Conklin Cars dealership patriarch. Others run together, located in relation to landmarks like roads and trees. The plot was near the main road, I remembered, but it was farther to the east than I thought. When I cross the Lentz row, seeing the nearly mauve flat stones first from behind, startled, I stare a moment at my grandparents' joint stone before raising my arm to say I've found it, using the other hand to keep my sundress from rising in the heated breeze. I have not seen the stone before and expect only to read my grandfather's name, his dates. But the widest gravestone, double, on the south end, holds two names: Robert L. Lentz and his dates of life, and to the right of the engraved rose, Marjorie E. Lentz and her year of birth, followed by a dash. They are my mother's father, buried, and her mother, empty below the stone with her name and living, making her way across the crabgrass on the arm of her daughter. I halt on my grandmother's name and the pang of limbo, the dash with only a before.

I had sat in the row of chairs behind my grandmother, here, two-and-a-half years before, in a three-sided tent on the last day of November. Before us, my grandfather's casket had lain draped in the American flag. My first funeral and first loss of a close relative: I had shivered against the metal chair and wiped flecks of flurries from my black fleece scarf, while the wind, as strong as Kansas could make it, pillowed the green partial tent and smacked against its poles. We were outside for only about twenty minutes that day, enough time for the anonymous pastor to read a few Bible passages and the two officers from Fort Riley to play "Taps" from locations one hundred yards out on either side of the tent: "Taps" on a dreary day made colder and more earnest by the snap of wind, notes from two bugles crossing plots to meet above my grandfather, a World War II veteran healthy until just two weeks prior, when a congenital heart condition had soaked him in sweat on the front porch and marked the end. My grandmother had let out one

quick sob, more of a sigh, when the young soldier placed the folded flag in her lap. And then we had walked away.

Across the field, I see my grandmother's tender steps and the blonde curls of her perm lifting from her forehead like petals. She pinches up her nose in a squint as she points out stones to my mother by her side. Her lips move, candy pink as always, yet I hear nothing but the ghost of her accent through the wind.

The cemetery, for the living, is a waiting ground. According to this stone at my feet, my grandmother is incomplete, and when she arrives at my side, standing above her husband and the section of ground she will one day occupy, I hug her shoulders and knead down to her muscle to feel the give.

My father sets down a trash bag full of artificial flowers and special Memorial Day arrangements framed in wire and plastic. He dumps them out on the ground so my grandmother can choose the appropriate flower or arrangement for each name: Robert, Henry, Grace, Russell, Freda—all her husband's parents and siblings. The job has fallen into her hands now that her husband is gone, and she relies on my parents for help. Her own family is buried in Australia in plots she will never see.

Surveying the colors and kinds of flowers, she first tells Roger, her son, to put the "Dad" arrangement, centered between two small American flags, behind the stone bearing her husband's and her own name. A rectangle of artificial white roses, the interior spells "D-A-D" in red blooms, a name he wore to five children but also to her. The arrangement matches the flags. Roger wiggles it into the grass, and when it is set, I squeeze her hand and see her already visually choosing the next arrangement.

Skipping over her own name, she steps down to Henry, her father-in-law, and selects a lilac bunch, silk, for Roger to stick into the ground. The ground is dry for May, even though storms had moved over Kansas nearly daily a few weeks before. Roger, squatting behind the stone, works the green metal stem of the bunch into the dirt, but he cannot penetrate beyond the first half-inch.

He asks for a screwdriver, but we don't have one, and so my father offers his car key, no wider than the stem itself, though with teeth. Roger stabs the ground an inch behind the stone, repeatedly shoving it in, out, sideways, to make a hole. The key, flaked with dirt, is too short and simple for the work and makes the hole wider and less stable. Roger then pulls off the wire from another bouquet, more manageable without flowers in the way, and uses it to clear a new, small hole. He shoves the lilacs down, twists its stem into the dirt until it stands almost upright.

Grace, Henry's wife, is next, and after another fight with the ground, is decorated with silk sunflowers. My grandmother's brother-in-law, Russell, a large man who drowned in his own fluid, who would give my mother "Archie" comic books that were sticky because his fingers were always dirty with food, receives another bunch of lilacs like his father, and then my grandfather's sister Freda gets a bouquet of yellow carnations. As Roger finishes with the work, I gather the leftover flowers scattered on the ground back into the bag and cinch up the tie.

Meanwhile, my mother wanders over to other graves, other family lines nearby, and exclaims at her recognition of Leonard Martin (who worked for the school system with her father) and Ricky Blackburn (with whom my father went to school and recently was crushed by a tractor) and Marlie Bretz (who, at sixteen, was hit by a train with her friends as they delivered Valentines in 1992). She seems to love the names, the decorations on the stones, noting the dates, and wondering about the lives they lived, how they died at what age.

I again stand above my grandparents' stone, linger over the name in the ground of the woman waiting beside me in a blue blouse. If her birth date were also engraved, more than just the year, it would be my own, the date that ensures a connection between a grandmother and granddaughter, regardless of distance. I fear the completion of her dates, the closure of the dash, for she is already eighty-six. I wish to erase her name and dates all together—the time will come without the stone's forewarning—but they remain, a conclusion in waiting. I say nothing to her of this separation: the strangeness of her skin above her name.

## TERMINATION

I cannot help but have morbid thoughts on the highway. Thoughts of tragic deaths, roadkill, my own. Both the sun and the moon heap heaviness on my eyelids, and the blacktop lulls all too often. I have a tendency to fall into seconds of sleep when going seventy, and find myself angled toward some guard rail or ditch just a few feet from the right wheels. So far, the levator muscles have kicked in at the saving moment, before disaster, and I'm wakened, terrified, until I calm and do it again.

Though falling asleep while driving is not by choice, I have had the sadist's thought of running the car into a curve, of ending it on a particularly stressful night, and of course the thought of who would care. The ease of such an ending is too appealing, even though I would never carry it through. But there are those who do die on the highway, and many of them are animals. I have been in the habit of giving a silent, or vocal, "God bless" to each dead animal; I wince with the knowledge that it could have died with the strike of my tires, but only two birds and one, I think, opossum, have ended because of my driving.

Too many end by tires. You don't need much light to notice the change in color on the

highway, the burst and drawn splatters of dark against the faded pavement. It is clear that only hours, days, or a week ago, a deer met a car and made this stain. Struck at high speed, the legs pop and under the tires she goes. Bump. Or rather she flips up and lands like death on the hood and up into the windshield. Thud. Crack. The blood spills out, warm, and seeps into the pores in the pavement. This is where it ends. And it ends at least five times along the stretch of K-10 I drive between Lawrence and Kansas City to visit my boyfriend, Jedsen. As my headlights catch the change, I cannot help but shudder at the spot where the living met and parted less one.

I see the stains on the highway, some carried on in tire tracks, some pooled. Tonight, as I drive I-70 on the way home from my Great Grandma Jackson's funeral, the blood startles me more than usual. My eyes try to be my own brights and find the eyes of the deer on the side—prevent them from crossing. I fear the sudden sprint from black.

Tonight, the moon is bright and nearly full, which makes for a less lonely solo trip across Kansas highways. The darkness isn't so dark. My eyes try to keep the moon in sight. It is ringed, haloed—not in a miniature, local way as I've seen before but expansive, as big as a platter through my windshield. I scan the clouds to make sure it's not some freak pattern, and I move my head around to make sure it's not my windshield playing tricks. I can't help but think of an angel protecting the moon, which in turn protects me: a halo in my view, as if it were Great Grandma. After all, the preachers at her funeral insisted that she was happy in heaven now, reunited with her four driving buddies, and could once again flex her one-hundred-five-year-old hands, the years now erased. But I don't believe in miracles or celestial protection, so I drive on in the light and look for eyes. The other half of me watches the stained dashes of the dividing line.

The deer are out in Kansas, particularly in late fall, and this is the first of December. They

graze along the sides of highways in pairs or groups, nibbling down the ground and sometimes darting onto the road in the way the cat runs mad out of the litter box, out of something for which she feels wrong and excited. This is why my left index finger and thumb rest on the headlight knob, stretched through the steering wheel to make the most of its openness. At intervals, usually limited to five or ten seconds, I shift the knob back to turn on the brights. The better to see deer with, if only for one more second, or less, just to know of their presence. First the eyes' light and then the shine of the coat, neat and painted white until it's all black again, and the black is behind the car, somewhere, no longer my responsibility.

I have had plenty of opportunities to hit a deer driving down back highways at night. My headlights have lit too many eyes. But, until recently, the closest I've come is their passing by on the side, passing during moments without the urge to bolt across pavement. I know I'm lucky. I have no deer whistle on my front bumper emitting a high-pitch warning (though I've heard it doesn't work anyway), but the deer have stayed out of my path for the most part. Except for the one that was already dead. Hit several cars in front of me, the body appeared in my headlights, skidded straight to me after being nicked by the car ahead. The eyes were open, up. I opened mine, my mouth. Bump. She went under. I went over the ribs and kept on. A rattle formed somewhere under the hood. She must have settled somewhere near the center of the road, finally, done, and made her spot on the highway.

They (a.k.a. Jedsen) say never to swerve for any living thing. *Tighten your grip, lock your arms, clench your jaw and scream if you have to. Just don't swerve, you hear me. It's better the animal than you.*

While I think I've mostly internalized the stiff-no-swerve rule, theoretically, I can't say that I would be able to implement it in a time of panic, when a living thing is involved. This is a

girl who says “Cute!” when she sees mice near train tracks or in farm sheds, who nearly cries in anger when a bird inexplicably flies—too slow—into the hood of her car. I brake for squirrels. I would stop on a highway and wait for a deer or raccoon to cross not to save myself or the car but to save the animal. But I’m no martyr, and I don’t mean to put myself on a will-die-for-nature pedestal. The thing is, we put the road there, and the animals need to cross it. We drive our cars there, and the animals don’t know these beasts. The local news can blame deer-accident deaths on the deer all they want, but the deer die, too, and more often; the deer is the mark of death on the highway. *There was once something living here. You can no longer have it.*

#### INTERRUPTION

My mother stood at the kitchen counter and wrote romances in perfect cursive, every letter planned in curve. The female character was always named Amy, and her male friend was usually Dale, named for Dale Midkiff, the actor with soft voice and steel eyes in the show *Time Trax*, whom my mother gushed over. At least that’s what she told me or what I gleaned from the few pages she let me read. She filled spiral notebooks and wouldn’t let anyone read them. When she was finished or even mid-way, she tore them in two, the metal spiral bent out, the only link remaining between the two halves.

When I saw her starting a new notebook, I would ask her what happened to the other story she was working on.

“I threw it away,” she’d reply, the words drawn out as if they were obvious.

“But why?” I’d ask, not understanding how a person can toss their work, no matter its worth.

“It wasn’t any good,” was her response. Before my own writing had ventured beyond my

journal, I prompted her to keep her stories—she would want to read them again someday. Or she should at least finish them, carry the story through. But large sections of the pages were crossed out, black bands over words, before she even decided to throw out a story. Not good enough.

At some point, she stopped writing stories and bought more four-dollar romances from the grocery store: not the mystery, suspense, thriller, or especially racy romances but the ones involving men saving women from desperate times, their love inevitably blossoming into a child. She blushed during the reading of romantic parts, as she leaned over her counter, and told me, “Wow, that was steamy,” when I asked why she had laughed into a sigh. When I was twelve and asked to read them when she was done, she let me borrow just one. I took it to my room and skimmed it, uninterested in the story—I wanted to know what “steamy” read like. And I learned how a man can touch a woman from that book, as I lay on my bed and read one passage in particular over and over, envisioning the way a man and woman can love one another.

In my late teens, I took on the writing myself: romantic poems flooded with dashes. The use of dashes was inspired by my slight obsession with Emily Dickinson—those bits of interruption, movement, and pause in her poems. I did my honors project in college on how she bridged the gap between Romantics and Modernists before I even knew what those words meant. I learned as I went, filling in the gaps, the student who set a thesis before the process of inquiry. Later in college, in a graduate course on Whitman and Dickinson, I waited out the “I sing myself” for the brevity of Emily. At the end of that course, instead of yet another academic paper, I chose to write a creative piece imagining and exploring Emily’s relationship with her sister-in-law, Susan. I made much of Emily’s dialogue lines directly from her poems, as if that was the way she spoke—in dashes and metaphor. But, to me, she did speak in dashes and even capital letters.

The dash is, technically, used for emphasis, for work heavier than the comma can handle, and Emily's work is weighed in dashes that "fragment language" and "cause unrelated words to rush together." Kamilla Denman, in "Emily Dickinson's Volcanic Punctuation," says "the dash that dominates [Emily's] prolific period is a horizontal stroke, on the level of this world. It both reaches out and holds at bay."<sup>11</sup> My first poems were flanked in dashes, emotion, pause, not so much for the effect on the language but for the emotion. I didn't know what I was saying, though every poem was heaped in love—first love—because Jedsen was the one to prod me to writing. *You should write poems*, he had said, and so I did. In the Rimmer Learning Resource Center at Hutchinson Community College, where I tutored English three hours a week but rarely had a customer, I started little verses, and the dash became the punctuation of choice. No period, no comma, just dashes. When I'd written a draft of a poem (complete, I thought), I showed it immediately to Jedsen, and when he asked why I used so many dashes, I replied, "That's how I think."

My poetry eventually evolved into the use of other punctuation, as I began to understand what the dash should and should not do. But Denman reminds us of the weight of the dash, drawing in its definitions from the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

Its origins in ellipsis connect it semantically to planets and cycles (rather than linear time and sequential grammatical progression), as well as to silence and the unexpressed. But to dash is also "to strike with violence so as to break into fragments; to drive impetuously forth or out, cause to rush together; to affect or qualify with an element of a different strain thrown into it; to destroy, ruin, confound, bring to nothing, frustrate, spoil; to put down on paper, throw off, or sketch, with hasty and unpremeditated vigour; to draw a pen vigorously through

writing so as to erase it; [is] used as a euphemism for ‘damn,’ or as a kind of verbal imprecation; [or is] one of the two signals (the other being the dot) which in various combinations make up the letters of the Morse alphabet.”<sup>12</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Coupons sprawl across the dining-room table. My mother tends to them, one by one. The mutilated inserts from the Sunday paper pile across from her, while the late afternoon sunlight scatters across the trampled shag. Yet, the room is dim and hazy with dust.

With precision, my mother picks one coupon, delicately trims the edges, circles the expiration date in blue, and places it in the appropriate pile on the tablecloth: frozen, laundry, dessert, boxed. Her jittering foot on a table rung squeaks a code as I open the screen door, back for a weekend visit after three months gone.

She stares into thin black lines, focusing on the thirty-five-cent sliver of paper, and does not look up as I walk toward her and set my duffle bag by the buffet.

“I thought you were going to be here hours ago,” she blurts, lips firm, as she turns to me. Dashed lines frame her fingers, dark in the shadows of lost light. And she places another coupon in a pile.

## ENCLOSURE

With pruning shears, we snipped orange blossoms and honeysuckle from the bushes in her backyard. My Great Grandma Jackson selected a stem, first reaching her nose out to smell its center, and held it taut while I snipped. She collected them in her left hand, a growing bundle of color against her violet blouse. When the spray outgrew the stretch of her fingers, she said we

had enough and went inside to put them in plastic cups with water.

Every Memorial Day when I was younger, we would take Great Grandma Jackson out to Fairlawn Cemetery on the far east side of town, where the Jacksons and Chambers are. We set the cups of flowers in my father's trunk beside the already packed pink peonies, bought fresh from the neighbor's garden. At the cemetery, we unloaded the trunk and met the Jackson and Chambers stones by the road. In the small vases next to every grave, Great Grandma arranged bouquets for her lost family, chuckling as she went along the line and saying hello to each stone. When my brother and I would wander to read the scriptures engraved on angel statues over babies' graves, she warned us not to step on the stones as we skipped because it was like you were stepping on the person. "It's disrespectful," she'd say. And so we took pains to avoid stones and the ground above where we knew caskets lay. We made mazes with our tracks, zigzagging the graves from road to road while she trimmed stems to fit the vases.

But for the last six years of her life, Great Grandma Jackson slept through most days or rested in her armchair in the family room of her son and daughter-in-law's house with a half-empty cup of coffee in her left hand as she watched afternoon game shows. She left the house rarely, only to visit the doctor, and so had not been out on Memorial Day in over five years. My father, her grandson, did not take up her work, and so the Jackson and Chambers stones went bare in May.

The last few weeks of her life were spent asleep. My grandmother would wake her up to use the bathroom, and as she held on to her arm for support, she would say, "I should have died yesterday," no longer laughing but determined.

As we walk to find the Lentz family plot, before the slow movement nerves me and sets

me off to find it on my own, my mother asks if I've seen her and my father's empty plot farther into the cemetery, under a tree and on a hill. Yes, I say, I've seen it before. I don't care to see it again. I also tell her that I'm not the kind of person to travel across the state or country to decorate my family's graves.

"I remember with my heart, not with plastic flowers on one day of the year," I say.

"So you're not going to decorate our graves?" She says it as if she's offended, but I don't intend it to be.

"Well," I shrug, "that's just not how I'm going to remember you. It's not you. It's your body, your name, a box that you bought in a spot that you chose that you'll never actually experience."

She falls silent until we cross a dirt road, and she notes that she wouldn't like to be buried by the road because it would be too dirty and loud.

"Like you'd ever know," my father says, as he passes with the bag of flowers.

I remind her, shivering from the thought of burying my parents, that there won't be any such plot for me because I don't care to take up the ground in a box.

"Cremate me and then spread me somewhere."

"Where?"

"I don't know. I haven't found my place yet."

"Grandma's sister Dorothy was cremated. Then they spread her ashes on her land and planted a rose bush in that spot."

"That sounds lovely. You could do that."

"Ashes to ashes," Roger says as he walks by.

"Yep."

Though my mother searches for stories in the cemetery—lives short or long, and the names that accompany them—I see nothing but space. I imagine boxes, now filled not with names but bones, and see waste. Unlike for my mother, engraved names don't bring me peace; bodies enclosed from the earth bring back fear of separation. The coffin holds us back from becoming something new, and it keeps our bodies in wait for centuries until there is no more room and no one left to remember our names. And then, a change will come, though we know not what. A box in the ground, then, is not eternal.

Perhaps I want to be in every place, a part of everything, not tied to a six-foot-long section of ground until the day comes when I'm removed. I love the top of St. Mary's Glacier in the Rockies, a shaded spot on the Kansas River in Lawrence, the steps outside the planetarium in Chicago. And if I had to choose a cemetery, I want to become a part of that church cemetery in Tulfes, Austria, with the roses and nothing but Alps beyond the ledge. But I would not be buried. I don't want to be separate from any place in a box. Why not actually become them, let ashes comingle with soil and grow into briars.

## OMISSION

I drive south on Highway 50 toward Hutchinson on a Monday. A frozen afternoon keeps the heat on high, directed at my feet, and I try not to think of my Great Grandma Jackson in a casket, as she will be the next morning at her funeral. The air does not reach my face, and I stare, blank and exhausted, at the road ahead, waiting for the bend west onto K-150.

On the side of the road, a white bird rises. Caught in a wind gust, maybe purposefully so, it flies still, a set point in the sky if only until the wind ceases. It waits, wings extended, for an *after*. For movement beyond the pause. There is the breeze before its scent, rushing in fresh and

cold from the west, and then, in those moments of halting, the meeting of air and matter. The bird and the wind are one, in balance and delay. When the gust dies, the bird carries on, changed in course.

## Fata Morgana

I sold a Carebear cup to a lady in a pink sweat suit. She slapped a dime on the card table and walked back down the driveway where she came from. When she got in her car, she tossed the cup into the backseat, a backwards lob into food wrappers.

It was a Saturday morning in July, and my remaining shredded wheat bloated in the tepid milk of boredom as I manned the cashbox of our annual garage sale. My mother and I had gotten up at six to set out the tables with mostly clothes and various Fisher Price toys. After the six-thirty rush, we began the steady stare at passing cars and caught dozens in drive-bys—they gazed from their windows, taking in the tables as they made their decision not to stop. My brother began drinking the lemonade we had made to sell, as sweat dripped down his ears from his buzz-cut.

When twenty minutes passed between customers, we went inside to watch from the screen door, eyes divided between an episode of *Land of the Lost* and the road. As we shielded our eyes from the sun glaring off my brother's white baby shoes piled above our own on a table, my mother said we needed some excitement to spark interest. Go do cartwheels on the lawn, she said. Did our signs blow off the poles? Does your dad still have those old firecrackers?

Then a little later, we witnessed her miracle. From our post at the door, we watched two vehicles collide, a moment of a turbulent cross in the intersection. The van moving west pitched up and over on its side; the car going north bounced back, bitten but upright.

We sprinted from the house to the smoking mess, expecting death. A man, white beard and round, got out of the car and rested his hand on the hood. It was our pastor, and he lived just two blocks south. He scratched his beard as we surrounded the upside-down woman. She felt her face and found blood.

We recognized her as the Richmond mother from around the corner, and my mother told me to run to her house and tell her husband. I hesitated, nervous for what to say when I got there, but began with a sprint, the smell of gasoline swelling my lungs. I glanced back as I ran past our driveway of sun-baked discards and saw Pastor Allen walking, walking serenely home, south down Jefferson in the heat, a mirage in the woman's screams.

## Time Trial

The calendar is my mother's closest friend. She tells it when it's sunny, when the water bill was sent, when she last talked to her daughter on the phone. It knows her affection for stickers—Carebear, snowflake, cats—all too well. When my brother and I were younger and in public school, she would thrill to bring home a free school calendar from enrollment in August—not because she couldn't buy her own but because the school dates were already recorded, printed with the dates, and she would have the opportunity to arrange her days around those marked “Inservice” and “Boys’ Basketball.” Boxed days accumulated black marks and spilled over into the margins.

Though she treated the calendar as a journal, most of the dates took root in her mind. She would correct you if you said it had been a few weeks since you last went to a certain restaurant, for she knew it had been only two. She reminded you that Aunt Barryl began her visit from Australia on a Saturday in August, a drippy day, when she was twelve, and her red sundress had torn at the hem when it snagged on the front gate. She had worked at Dairy Queen from July 3, 1976 to November 16, 1977, and then again from March 8, 1979, to May 22, 1980, she said, when you asked about her jobs before she became a mother.

She never cared for mathematics, but her love of dates spread over to numbers and money, income taxes and bank statements. My mother maintains to this day that her favorite job was as a roving bank teller because she was quick on the calculator and was the first to feel new bills, sticky and stiff between her fingers. Though she quit before she married my father, she still plays “bank” when she balances the checkbook, sitting down at the dining-room table with her register minutes after opening the mail. I inherited this love of counting, though I never bother to balance my own checkbook.

When she and my father married in 1982, they began taking attendance and counting the offering during Sunday School at First United Methodist Church. While my brother and I were in our respective classes learning the names of the Apostles, my mother and father sat across from each other at a large, CEO-quality desk, my father on the side with the drawers, and my mother leaning sideways, her legs crossed, surveying the piles of bills.

Occasionally, when I felt listless about Sunday School, my mother let me skip and sit on her lap in the work room, the scent of Pine-Sol swirling from the wall of cleaning supplies at our backs. As my father returned from collecting the attendance sheets and envelopes of offering from the classrooms, he slid the swollen yellow packets over to us to count. My mother let me open them, digging my thumb behind the seals, and dump out the money to sort. Small bills on the left, big on the right. Ordering coins in tens, fifties, or dollars, I stacked pennies and arranged quarters into square forts. With her arms around me, chin over my right shoulder, she gathered a stack of bills and ran them crisply through her fingers. She slipped them quick from one hand to the other in a mystic counting practice. The blur of bills, the way she counted in her head faster than I could see them, set me in awe of the accumulation of numbers. When she had finished, marking the number down on a piece of scrap paper, she told me to check her. One by one I placed bills in a stack on the desk and often lost track, having to begin again. With patience, she kept silent count with me, and when I had finally finished, she was always right.

My mother placed the gallon of whole milk on the conveyor at the end of the line and told me to hold out my hand. I extended it with a swoop, and she placed a dollar bill and coins in my palm. I promptly enclosed the coins in the bill within my fingers so as not to lose them.

“I’ll be right outside those doors,” she said, as she twisted slightly to point behind her to

the north entrance beyond the ice-cream cases, squinting in the morning sun casting pillars through Braums' large front windows.

I watched my mother walk out the door and disappear around the corner of the entrance, her dark-brown hair bobbing on top with the wave. I was five, and my nose touched the side of the counter. I was just tall enough to see, on my toes, the streaks of condensation and smears of leaked ice cream on the counter. Beyond the gray of the counter, employees filled cones with double-dips of ice cream, and the whirl of blenders for their renowned Mix blended treat left the contact of metal on metal ringing after the machine had stopped. I waited, squeezing the bill in my hand to feel folds and almost wrinkles, the hard discs inside. I scooted the milk down the counter with my open hand as I moved forward in line and wiped the condensation caught on my fingers on the back of my floral, cotton shorts.

Joella, a heavy-set Mennonite woman with thick joyful cheeks and a voice with cheer in its vibrations, smiled and said hello when it was my turn.

"Hi." I stood on my toes and pressed my chest against the counter for support.

"That's \$1.97," she said, leaning over slightly to look at me. She seemed far away, a step above, on the other side of the counter, a situation I would later know when I worked retail, and I laid out the money. She waited silently as I counted, and the people behind me in line watched patiently as I scooted nickels and quarters from one pile to another and slightly moved my lips as I counted in my head. *Twenty-five, fifty, seventy-five, eighty-five, ninety-five, one-hundred.*

"There," I announced when I was finished, and Joella checked my work, picking up the coins as she counted.

"Very good, Kari! You got it," she exclaimed as she dropped the coins into the register and gave me a few in return. She placed the milk in a paper bag and lowered it over the counter

onto my waiting arms. We exchanged “byes” as I gripped the bottom of the bag and leaned back, my spine arched into a reverse C to balance the weight. I moved in a shuffle, and when I reached the heavy glass doors, I pushed my back into one and found the annex flooded in light and warmth. When my mother saw me, she opened the second door.

“How’d you do?” she asked, as she tried to take the bag from my hands.

“I have it,” I said, and shifted my hips to move the bag to the side.

“Here’s three cents. It was one-ninety-seven.” I thrust my palm out under the bag.

“Are you going to try to carry that all the way home?” She picked the pennies, sticky with sweat, from my palm.

“Yes.”

“Okay, but you let me know when it gets too heavy.”

I panted in the March warmth and adjusted my grip. I knew I wouldn’t make it the three blocks home like this, but my independence, spurred on by my mother, overwhelmed logic for the weight that could be sustained by little arms. By the time we reached 28<sup>th</sup> Street, half a block away, I muttered an “Okay, Mom,” and she bent down to take the bag, swinging the purse hung across her body to her back.

“You made it pretty far,” she said as she stood and rested the milk on her right hip, the way she held my baby brother, and the weight seemed to be easy for her.

As we began walking again, I held her empty hand.

My mother first kissed a man—my father, in his silver Challenger—when she was twenty-one. She told me this right before I began middle school, and I swore to myself I would not be that painfully innocent until I was that “old.” I envisioned a timeline of our lives, one

above the other, with the date of first kiss signified by pink lips. I wanted that stamp at least by sixteen so that I could avoid the saying “Sweet sixteen and never been kissed.” It was a competition with my mother, she the ghost in the time trial of a video game, *Mario Kart*, racing forward, and I had to keep up, surpass her time, reach the finish line, and set the new family record. There was hope for my brother, already girl-crazy in pre-school, as he would come home and gush about Lauren or Ashlyn, those cute girls in ponytails. He had the heart of a Casanova, and we were sure he would have a girlfriend early on.

Our crushes became the daily topic at dinner, and my mother would ask for updates. I wrote about my crushes in my journal, flat on my stomach in bed. I kept a “like-list” and updated it monthly, moving boys up or down in favor, though most of them were boys I had never talked to. Some dropped off entirely after only a month at the top.

From my bedroom between the living room and my parents’ bedroom, I could hear everything through the thin walls. One night in seventh grade, I awoke to sobbing. Not my own, but my mother’s on the other side of the wall. “Why won’t you touch me?” I heard over and over. “Why won’t you touch me?” in a slurred cry. “Why won’t you touch me? It’s been twenty-six months.” I lay awake startled, afraid of the ghostly voice I could not see. I pictured my mother rocking back and forth on her knees, pleading down to my father stretched out on his side, the cold draft from the window sending goosebumps down her thighs. Her voice was the only clarity. Whispers in staccato—deeper, unintelligible—moved under the rhythm of why’s.

The drive to “beat” my mother at kissing was significantly hindered by my shyness, awkwardness, and general naiveté about the world. My 90s generation allowed me to have mad crushes on multiple boys at one time, but my conservativeness, the one that led me to wear

oversized T-shirts and sweatshirts all through high school, forbade me from actually talking to those boys and acting on those feelings. Instead, my feelings turned to the unattainable, a safe love from a distance. Five guys, singers in a band, became my relationship. For over four years, from about age twelve through seventeen, I put my love and energy into the Backstreet Boys. I kept track, like anniversaries, of how long I had loved them.

Through magazine articles, music videos, “unofficial” books, and MTV interviews, I learned their birthdays, siblings’ names, and favorite foods. I wrote, dutifully, “I love BSB” and/or “I love Nick Carter” on the fogged-up shower door while waiting for the conditioner to sink into my hair. I promised them that no matter what, no matter where life took us or how old we got, I would always love them.

When I turned sixteen and got my own car, a 1995 Ford Escort sedan, I paid the extra forty-four dollars for the personalized license plate: KTBSPA. People would stare at it and try to guess what the acronym stood for. *Kari Tom Brother Sister Play Always? Are they call numbers for a radio? Is it a spa somewhere?* I slyly smiled, knowing that hardly a soul would get the reference to the Backstreet Boys, that it stood for “Keep the Backstreet Pride Alive.” And I wanted to keep it that way. It was a guilty love in public, one I tried to keep secret for the shame of loving something so cliché and unreachable, but a love that was unmistakable and accepted at home, where their faces claimed my walls.

I wore a “Nick” necklace, bought for a quarter out of a machine, day and night for a year in tenth-grade. But I always wore shirts with necklines high enough to cover it. I didn’t want to explain the name. Though I wanted proudly and physically to display my love through a necklace, I didn’t want anyone to actually see it. I would touch it when I was nervous, when I felt alone, holding my palm to my upper chest; it was like touching a name I knew.

Likewise, two years earlier, in my home-economics class in eighth grade, after sewing a tote bag and embroidering initials onto the pocket, I explained to my teacher that “BSB” was my cousin, that this would be hers, and only my closest friends knew the truth. My love, well, obsession, for the Backstreet Boys was at once an embarrassment and a poorly hidden secret among my peers and a pervading force that consumed most aspects of my life, from my bedroom walls to my television habits to the way I ordered a BLT at restaurants as a BTL (the initials of Backstreet Boy Brian Thomas Littrell) to writing a letter to A.J. when he was in rehab to importing up to twenty-dollar singles, with the help of my mother, just so I had every song. I wrote to ten penpals at one time over the bond of BSB, and we all signed our letters with our favorite Boy’s last name. I sang “I’ll Never Break Your Heart” so earnestly along with the radio that I got dizzy from lack of air. And I prayed for them, prayed to meet them. I once entered a contest to meet them at Sears, and I prayed every night that my name would be drawn as the winner.

I taped every television performance on (what became) twenty-three VHS tapes decorated with magazine cut-out pictures and labeled with appearance and date of each clip. My family got cable and a VCR just so I could have MTV and record their appearances. On the weekends, I listened to Rick Dees’ Top 40 and Casey Kasem’s American Top 40 countdowns and kept a notebook of their place on the charts: a notebook of numbers.

My mother played into all of this, supporting my desire to own every magazine in which they appeared and every album or single they released. She knew how it felt to pine after famous boys, and as I fell in love with the images on posters, so did she. We sat cross-legged on the glossy tile of the grocery store’s magazine aisle and blushed together as our eyes traced the muscled arms of the boys we loved. Though we had always been close, we bonded over gossip

about their girlfriends and tattoos, and squealed when any of their songs came on the radio.

She had once loved David Cassidy, though not on this scale because her parents would not have promoted her obsession. On the floor of their bedroom, my mother and her younger sister Julie had flipped through the *TV Guide* for pictures of the young musicians, the radio down low as they gushed together, heads bobbing as they sang off tune.

I kissed Garrett Williams in preschool. I just turned around to my long-time crush and kissed his lips hard and stiff right there in line for a field trip, our fathers (the day's sponsors) standing at the door, and teachers nearby. I just kissed him, felt the impulse of desire and spunk, and did it. It was a thrill because he didn't wipe off his lips and say "gross" afterward. He simply grinned, scratched an itch behind his left ear, and turned back around in line to watch the eraser his friends were kicking disappear under the wall of cabinets. And I stood there grinning, too, ready to go catch my first fish and throw it back, at my father's side.

Nothing came of the crush, of course. We were four. We never agreed to call each other "boyfriend" and "girlfriend" like so many children did, and we never touched again, much less kissed, even though we miraculously were seated next to each other the following year in morning kindergarten.

Garrett Williams certainly was not my only crush in grade school. Miguel, Mike, and Anthony also took turns (or time-shared) as objects of my gaze, or "googly-eyes," as Mrs. Birt, my first-grade teacher, called them when she caught me staring across the room for an obnoxious length of time. But that, too, never went beyond the meeting of eyes or the aggressive push of fingertips during a game of Capture the Flag in PE.

Through songs and scriptures in Sunday School, where the boys were more like brothers

to me, I learned of virginity and marriage. And I carried those values home, where I heard them again from my mother. As I got older, my mentality became “date only a guy you can see yourself marrying.” So those awkward boys—two, I think—who asked me out through notes handed to me by a friend didn’t stand a chance because, even though they were nice enough, I did not look at them and immediately think “my future husband.” And, if you checked the setting of my eyes from about age twelve on, “my future husband” would have been blinking “In Use.”

The boys with daring friends, or those who didn’t like to write, sent an envoy with a message between classes or in the gym before school.

“Chris wants to know if you’ll go out with him.”

“Um, I’m not really looking for a boyfriend right now,” I’d say, lying, because he wasn’t good enough. “I can’t,” I’d say, because I hadn’t sought him out. He had chosen me, and I didn’t want him in return, that boy in baggy jeans and red hair. It was fear, I think, in part. And just plain rejection. I was shy, but I’d go home and complain to my mother about not having a boyfriend, writing my name with *Mrs.* in front of it in my journal. Woe was me.

But the notion of dating around as a teenager seemed pointless. Why would I go out with a boy if I knew I didn’t see myself marrying him? Wouldn’t it be a waste of time and youth? A waste of flirtation when I couldn’t have sex anyway? And so that’s how it went until senior year when I actually asked a boy from church—two years younger—to prom. Jon Hooker was cute, smart, and, perfectly, immature.

At church, I had known of my prom plan for months, but I was too shy to execute it, too scared of rejection after those few boys who had, though indirectly, been at the receiving end of my “no.” Knowing that time was running out with prom only a month away, and that everyone was dispersing after Youth Group on that Wednesday night, my face already burning before the

question, I sat down next to him in the corner of the maroon-carpeted “pit,” a square area of seating with big blocks of carpeted risers three-tall at its highest.

“Hey, will you go to prom with me?” It just came out because it had to, and I was startled at the words.

“Sure.”

“Cool.”

He actually said yes, though part of it may have been because his brother was my age and also going to our prom. I didn’t care either way.

Nothing happened at prom, and nothing happened that whole summer of hanging out—not dating—except one moment of brief hand-holding on a turbulent plane ride back from a Methodist youth conference in Tennessee. To this eighteen-year-old, holding hands was like sex: our skin touched and twined. It was a triumph. And then a few weeks later he broke my heart in the pouring rain in Carey Park, saying we shouldn’t see each other anymore when we’d never officially begun anyway.

My mother bought me a book about sex in fourth grade: *Asking About Sex and Growing Up*. She handed it to me one afternoon when I got home from school, and neither of us remember what either of us said, but I took it to my room and flipped through to find the pictures. It was nothing graphic, only illustrations of “how girls grow up” and “how boys grow up” with the progression of curves and body hair from child to adult. I don’t remember actually reading the book, in question-and-answer format, because I didn’t know what masturbation was until high school, even though it fell under the “Touching Feels Good” chapter. I must have been too shy to read it, even in the privacy of my own room. What I wasn’t too shy to do that year was take the

book to school to share with friends. One day when we were lining up for recess, I sneaked the book out of my desk and hugged it inside my shirt, arms crossed, as we filed outside. On the playground, I gathered a few girlfriends on the platform of the jungle gym and slipped the book from my shirt. There were a few gasps and quite a few giggles. I flipped to the illustrations, past those embarrassing words, and we traced our bodies from where they were to where they would be. We stared at the drawings of boys, like those playing basketball on the other side of the playground, to teenage boys and men, and none of us spoke.

When our teacher, Mrs. Mallon, noticed us hunched over something and not playing as usual, she approached the Jungle Gym and asked to see what we were looking at.

“Nothing,” I replied, burning with shame and fear at being caught.

But she reached through the slats and took the book that I had hastily closed and turned on its back.

“Where did you get this?”

“Home,” I whispered.

“You can’t have this here. It’s not appropriate, and no books are allowed during recess.” She gripped the book between her ribs and upper arm. “Now, go sit on the bench. You’ll spend the rest of recess there, and you’ll get the book back at the end of the day.”

From the shaded bench under the oak tree, I sat sobbing for the remaining ten minutes of recess, my first time getting in trouble at school. Though I knew bringing a book about sex to school was wrong, the shock on my teacher’s face revealed more than a shock about the subject—it was a shock about character. Quiet Kari as a ten-year-old didn’t do naughty things like look at drawings of naked boys in a children’s sex book. I hid it under my dresser when I got home and didn’t open it again.

\* \* \*

At nineteen, my mother sits on the couch in the grocery-bagger's studio apartment, her hands pressed between her crossed legs. She watches *M.A.S.H.* on TV as he dresses for work after their first lunch date at Everybody's. Between socks, he breaks to show her his record collection, and he points to his favorite songs.

“That’s kind of sci-fi,” my mother says, adjusting the jacket of her green knit pant suit and re-crossing her legs away from him. His glasses fall slightly down his nose, and he sniffs when he pushes them back up with one finger. She nods at Randy John Forsyth, her first date, and tries to watch *M.A.S.H.* while he selects another record.

My mother would not see Randy John Forsyth again, and she wouldn't date again until the blind date during which she met my father: an exchange of hellos at the Kansas State Fair. When they saw each other alone the next week, my mother told him about her TV boyfriends, Robert Wagner, Michael Douglas, and Mark Harmon. He liked them, too, he said, and they bonded over actors, spent their first months learning each other through television shows.

Just before she met my father, my mother had sent off for a picture of Mark Harmon, and when it arrived, she tacked it to her bedroom wall. And after they married, she taped up a shirtless poster of Tom Selleck, his black-haired chest sweaty from playing volleyball, in the basement. She would blush over these men to my father, and he would grin.

I didn't care so much for boys at school during the obsessive period of my life, other than side-crushes, because I had “my Boys” always with me, always watching from the walls, always singing in my head. The kissing competition with my mother was still in the back of my mind, but my consumption of love through songs covered it up. I thought I knew what love was.

I can't remember exactly when I stopped praying for them. The posters came down in totality when I was eighteen and was given permission to repaint my room. My mother made a deal with me: if she allowed me to repaint my room, I couldn't cover up the paint job with posters again, I couldn't put any holes in the walls, and I had to stay in Hutchinson for Junior College instead of starting at a University. So I agreed to the removal of masculinity from my room, folding the posters and stacking them into a storage container destined for the basement, in exchange for color. Perhaps the love went unnoticed, perhaps I didn't feel it anymore, or perhaps the stalker gene wore off, but I let them go.

But the longer I went without kissing a real boy, the more I doubted my ability to do so. Use it or lose it? Would it come naturally? I'll admit to kissing, briefly, a poster from time to time, aligning my eyes with a boy's and imagining the scent of his skin as our faces closed. My lips fell cold on the wall and lifted with a *smack* from the glossy paper. I'd sit back on my bed and linger on the image, unchanged except for the inch-length of a slight warp from my moisture. The boy's inked lips dried within minutes, as if the kiss had never happened.

My friend gave me the movie *Never Been Kissed* for my eighteenth birthday, which was all too painfully true—only Drew Barrymore's character had just never been kissed *for real*. I had "stopped" looking for "my future husband" by age nineteen, content to wait until I moved away to finish college upstate, though I was quickly approaching the finish line of twenty-one, and the rite of passage was continually being pushed off. Had I been one to party, to go out with friends, to be confident about myself, I could have easily kissed a boy.

In the end, it was the boy who found me. Jedsen Williams strutted in late to the first day of biology class my sophomore year at the junior college. I was instantly attracted to the greased straight-black hair framing his face, wide-legged black pants, motorcycle boots with metal

spikes, ankle-length leather coat, and deep brown eyes, but I couldn't explain it. He was like no one I had ever been attracted to before. After half a semester of gazing at each other's reflections in the fire extinguisher glass on the front wall of the biology classroom and talking as English tutors in the library, he kissed me as we lay on his bedroom floor, propped up by pillows and covered in a blanket, watching a young Leonardo DiCaprio romance girls and run from Tom Hanks in *Catch Me if You Can*.

It was strange the way lips moved in the wake of another pair, not unlike but different from the way I had expected. I was nineteen years, eight months, and seventeen days old, but I was really much younger. And as we parted that night, I thought not about marriage but the twine of skin.

I beat my mother. My "life-after-first-kiss" timeline began nearly two years earlier than hers, yet I didn't brag. It had been a silent competition, after all. I was shy to tell her about my first kiss, and I don't think I ever have. She knew, of course, and she saw us on the driveway as I would wave Jedsen down the street, back to Galva, forty-minutes away, where he lived with his parents.

In addition to my mentality that I would date (and, therefore, kiss) only a man I could see myself marrying, I also swore that I wouldn't marry the first man with whom I had a serious relationship. (Though I'm not sure how that would have worked with the promise to myself to date only guys I would marry—unless I went under the assumption that the first relationship wouldn't work out.) I knew my parents had settled for one another because my mother had told me. Wouldn't marrying the first man you kiss be settling? It was all so confusing to me, those morals and rules I had set for myself in relation to my mother and my religion. It was a collision

of purity and defiance—at once both the desire to be everything but my mother and the desire to carry on her values. But I counted the ways I could better her.

And now I've left her behind. Five years since that first kiss, I am not married but hear and say "I love you" every day from the only man who has ever touched me. From the first months of our relationship, my mother counted how many times I said "I love you" to Jedsen as we prepared to get off the phone.

"Seven. You said 'I love you' seven times. Why?"

"That's just what we do. We say it a lot."

"But seven's a lot—a lot."

I shrugged, smiled.

My father said "I think I love you" just once before they got married, my mother explained to me once, and I felt guilty for hearing it every day from Jedsen. I have never heard my father say it to her, never seen him embrace her, in their near twenty-eight years of marriage. I see my father on the couch watching television and my mother kneeling on the floor, chest resting on his knees as her arms reach out and try to clasp his waist. His arms are inside her clutching, but they rest on his thighs, remote in the right hand, and let her hug, her eyes quiet, still saying *Why won't you touch me?* and counting the seconds of contact.

## On Mattresses

*Not just a white little  
tucked-in-tight little  
nighty-night little  
turn-out-the-light little  
bed—*

-- Sylvia Plath, *The Bed Book*

Instead of sitting at a table, the Ancient Romans ate on the lectus discubitorius, or table bed. Three people lay on their left side, the most honorable among them in the middle, and ate at leisure, licking their fingers of bread, oysters, and drips of wine. When they studied, they studied on the lectus lucubratorius, a reading bed with headboard and footboard that resembled a couch. In the atrium, opposite the door, the lavishly decorated lectus genialis, or marriage bed, was used and prepared only on the occasion of a new marriage. And they carried their dead on the lectus funebris, the last bed on the way to the pile.

The Ancient Romans had a bed for every need, and then they slept in the lectus cubicularis, or chamber bed. Though I admit to studying and eating on my bed, along with sleeping, it is all done on the same set of mattresses. My bed has held crumbs and stray shavings from spiral notebook paper, and then I've brushed them all off to go to sleep. Then in the mornings, my bed becomes my cat's bed, too, as she favors the rumpled covers to the couch. But, when it has been used as a cat bed in the past, she has wet it. Cat urine, and too much of it, during a spell of bad behavior last spring left large yellow stains and, worse, smells. My queen mattress has been soaked in places first by cat urine and then by Nature's Miracle in an attempt to erase the evidence both for my sake and hers.

But the mattress has been soaked and not cured. I flipped it so the stained, smellier side would be underneath and hopefully too faint for Snickers to pick up and recognize as a place she has gone before. And it worked for a while until another period of bad behavior when she got the

mattress again, and then again when the new waterproof mattress protector was being washed in between bad behavior. So the bed has been soaked and permanently stained by a cat, and there's nothing I can do about it now. Above layers of protection, I can no longer smell it, but I know Snickers can from the way she lingers over the area when she rises from her sleep.

As a child, like most, I was not immune to the occasional bedwetting. I don't remember my mother's reaction, but I assume my accidents didn't damage the mattress significantly or else, I hope, it would have been replaced much sooner than it was. My first twin bed, purchased new when I was two, sat sturdy and low. The mattress was floral, grey with burgundy and navy sprawling blooms, as if design even mattered once you covered it with sheets. Before I helped my mother make the bed, I would lay on the mattress, limbs claiming the surface I could reach, and make a mattress angel. The silky roughness of the material, like the first sip of hot chocolate, bit and soothed simultaneously. I flapped my arms and legs against the mattress until they burned in friction, and then settled in the angel-position until my mother shooed me off.

I was quite pleased with my "big girl bed." I nearly always slept well, whether my bed was positioned lengthways against the wall or perfectly centered, on 180 thread-count sheets or jersey knit. In fact, I never thought about the rectangle on which I slept, believing all beds were the same—different sizes, but all the same. But, as I came into the teenage phase of questioning everything I'd known—friends, God, mayonnaise—I would plop down on my bed and be unsatisfied with its tight bounce. I realized, after having slept on several friends' beds, that I was sleeping on a firm mattress not meant for sinking into but simply laying on a padded surface. I wanted cushy and pillowy, the mattress that molded to my curves as in those advertisements. I wanted to be the lady, naked in silhouette, enclosed on one side by a mattress. I wanted the mattress that held the full wine glass steady when the bowling ball dropped. I wanted a bed that

hugged, like I imagined a bed of royalty would do.

In fairy tales, princesses are often tested for their verity, for only a “real,” delicate princess can marry a prince, so kings and queens create experiments in sensitivity for girls claiming to be princesses. In one particularly tender tale from Sweden, a queen makes a bed seven mattresses high and between each she places a pea or nut or grain or straw or pinhead, in a series of tests (usually three) on successive nights. The princess is then proven if she sleeps terribly, as it means she is truly tender.

In the Swedish stories, however, the test for true princesshood lacks the drama of the Danish tale by Hans Christian Andersen, “The Princess and the Peas,” for the Swedish princesses-in-testing complain of a terrible night’s sleep only after the advice of a pet. Thus, the test isn’t accurate, or, at least, it doesn’t truly emphasize the supposed tenderness of royalty and the lust for a comfortable night’s sleep.

Published in Copenhagen in 1835 in the booklet, *Eventyr, fortalte for Børn (Tales Told for Children)*, “The Princess and the Peas” tells of this princess test involving mattresses and, of course, a pea. The 1846 translation by Charles Boner in Iona and Peter Opie’s *The Classic Fairy Tales* goes something like this: A princess arrived drenched from rain at the gate of a palace, insisting “she was a real Princess.”<sup>13</sup> Queen Dowager, distrustful of the wet girl’s words, said nothing “but went into the bed-room, took out all the bedding, and laid three small peas on the bottom of the bedstead. Then she took, first, twenty mattresses, and laid them one upon the other on the three peas, and then she took twenty feather-beds more, and put these again a-top of the mattresses.”<sup>14</sup> At this point I should add that Boner altered the original tale and test. Wary of the believability of just *one* pea testing a princess’s nerves, Boner changed the total to *three* peas. Three peas are more telling than one, I suppose.

And so the princess-in-test sleeps on the stack of feather-beds and mattresses, surely nothing less than plush in the palace of a king and queen. Yet, through all those layers, the princess feels the pressure of something underneath.

“Oh, no! a horrid night!” said the Princess. ‘I was hardly able to close my eyes the whole night! Heaven knows what was in my bed, but there was something hard under me, and my whole body is black and blue with bruises! I can’t tell you what I’ve suffered!’”<sup>15</sup>

Oh, how tender she was, bruising in anguish at the slightest bump. I can relate to the quick bruise; like a banana, jostle me or set me down with a plop, and it’ll show in green and brown, but even I at the age of eight, however princess-like I had become, would not have felt peas beneath me. Nevertheless, with the cries of anguish, the king and queen and prince had their proof. And though this tale doesn’t end so, I’m sure the prince and princess lived happily ever after, pea-less, on luxurious mattresses.

Illustrations of the tale show an elaborate bed with the tall stack of mattresses and feather-beds like pancakes, piled up not quite neatly. The princess, after her horrid night of sleep, contorts her body into an “oh my!” pose. I saw this illustrated live when I was in grade school and we attended a high school production of the musical version of the fairy tale, *Once upon a Mattress*. The mattresses, more like thick blankets, were piled high, and the actress groaned through the night, rolling and tossing and crying in pain.

A month before my parents married, they picked out a new queen bed together at Graber’s. Though my father was thirty years old, he still slept on the same single bed from his youth, and he still slept under the same beige paisley comforter, too. My father lived alone in a house he had inherited from his grandparents, and my mother, then twenty-two, visited him in

the evenings to watch TV and cook dinner.

The queen mattress marked their marriage. They bought it a month early so my father would get used to sleeping on it alone before my mother joined him. But, when they returned from their honeymoon and set in for their first night of sleep together on their bed, my mother strained to close her eyes. She had never slept in the same bed with a man and had never even sat on my father's bed, neither the queen nor the old twin, until that night. She laid stiff, her husband's childhood comforter pulled up to her chin, and wept.

My parents' flat mattress set is now twenty-eight years old, and the box spring, exposed, shows snags from kitten claws at the corners. My brother and I could bounce on it when we were small, bounce and fall, because the springs were all soft and collapsed down and back without snap. Though it has pits in it, my mother insists it's nothing you're going to fall through, and it sits in a low frame, housed by no headboard or footboard or sideboards. My father's twin-size comforter, now faded and piled, with strings hanging from all sides, still covers the bed because he kept taking off the floral bedspread they had bought on clearance on their honeymoon and folding it on the corner rocker. My mother gave up after several weeks of remaking the bed every morning, and now the bed is only for sleeping, theirs and the five cats'. Thus, though larger, the bed looks like it would have in my father's youth, and my mother sleeps beneath the weight of my father's childhood.

Experts say to replace a mattress every ten years, as dust mites and allergens collect in the material, and the padding or springs break down. As I drive down Iowa Street in Lawrence, a major thoroughfare, I see mattresses propped against light poles and sign posts in front of a discount furniture store. Wrapped in plastic, they slump slightly in the middle, as their weight sits low, and wait to replace the old. "Bed Sale," shouts the man on the side of the road, and he

waves a neon green sign proclaiming it the largest mattress sale of the season. I nod as I pass, and watch the wind whip the plastic around the white shapes.

When we speak of a mattress and a bed interchangeably, we do so speaking of the structure on which we sleep or the mattresses that make it. Here, I speak of a bed as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it:

A permanent structure or arrangement for sleeping on, or for the sake of rest. [ . . . ] It consists for the most part of a sack or mattress of sufficient size, stuffed with something soft or springy, raised generally upon a “bed-stead” or support, and covered with sheets, blankets, etc., for the purpose of warmth. The name is given both to the whole structure in its most elaborate form, and, as in “feather-bed,” to the stuffed sack or mattress which constitutes its essential part.<sup>16</sup>

A mattress makes the bed, yet a bed is both the mattress and the whole; it is a synecdoche in both senses of the word. The mattress itself goes back to the Neolithic period, when it most likely consisted of a gathering of grass, leaves, or straw covered in animal skins. Mattresses have been encased in cloth bags or coarse ticks, covered with silks, velvets, and brocades. They have been stuffed with reeds, wool, hay, pea shucks, cotton, coconut fiber, horsehair, and sometimes feathers. By the mid-eighteenth century, mattresses were covered in quality linen or cotton, and they took a shape with stitched edges. The late-nineteenth century invention of the box spring made mattresses less lumpy, and, later, artificial fillers and waterbeds became available, as well as air mattresses and memory foam (invented by NASA).

We go to bed to crawl into comfort and sleep pillowed between sheets. “We go to the mattresses,” Sonny says in the *The Godfather*, meaning, in Italian culture to prepare for battle. Mattresses were used as protection in early Italy, possibly hung on outer tower walls to cushion

canon attacks or laid on the floor of homes for hired soldiers to sleep on during wartimes.<sup>17</sup> You can trace *mattress* back to the Arabic words *al-matrah* and *taraha*, meaning “to throw” and “mat, cushion.” Out of the Arabic came *materaso* and *materas*, as Europeans began sleeping on cushions like the Arabs and adopted the word.

The etymology doesn't actually go back to the Latin *mater*, mother, as I expected—only the Medieval Latin *matracium*.<sup>18</sup> But mother holds you when you sleep as an embryo, an infant, a child afraid of the dark, and the mattress holds you now as you sleep. This shared root in *mater*, both turned to for protection, comfort, and growth, cannot be an accident.

Along with the queen bed, the only other piece of furniture my parents have purchased together is a brown-woven couch with wood details on the arms. The pattern looks and feels like yarn, a dull and dark figment of my parents' combined tastes. Though I have considered this couch ugly and slumped since I could speak, I couldn't deny my love of it whenever I became ill. The cushions, sagging, accompanied with the perfect height of the arm, made for a more bearable sleeping experience than my bed. No need to stack pillows when the arm was just right, and the cushions gave way to an aching body. It was a makeshift, form-fitting mattress, a bed when it needed to be. It cradled, a substitute for my mother's arms in the night.

Four and a half years younger than me, the perfect difference between us for us to be friends and not bickering siblings, my brother Tom would occasionally sleep on the floor of my bedroom, parallel to my bed, in a sleeping bag when he was four and five. His bedroom was larger than mine and wallpapered in brown floral and stripes, and it had two sets of windows compared to my one. He slept on a twin bed, too, on that mattress set that my father had slept on until my parents married, though he would often linger in my room until bedtime, until he asked

if he could stay.

When the habit of sleeping on the living-room couch rather than my bedroom floor became a nightly ritual around age sixteen, his bedroom door kept shut except for the moments of changing clothes, he completely abandoned his bed. The theory was that he just wanted to be by the television, but when I offered to give him my old one for his room, he refused. What we gathered from his few words was that he didn't want to sleep in his room, but we couldn't figure out why until my parents and I discussed it in his room when he was at work one day. I sat down on the bed to try it out and leaned to the center without trying. The bed felt off; it wasn't level. We pulled off the old blankets and fitted sheet to expose the mattress. Sunken just left of center, it was broken down and in. What looked normal on the surface was damaged underneath. All this time, my brother slept on the universally worn-in soft of the couch because his bed had a depression, and he refused to say anything about it.

But even seeing the sunken mattress with his own eyes, my father didn't think it was damaged enough to warrant tossing. "There's nothing wrong with it," he said. "With blankets, you can't feel it." Most of all, he didn't want to give up his childhood bed, the faded beige under which he had hid money and toys from his younger brothers. He argued with my mother to keep it, but, eventually, the half-century-old mattress left the house and was replaced by an extra twin bed from my grandparents. Over time, Tom did move back into his bedroom at night until he set up a miniature apartment in the basement, sleeping on a cheap Euro-style futon, one he claims is too firm and lacks support.

On the north side of Hutchinson, my parents' house was just under a mile away from one of the commercial hubs of the city, with the usual grocery stores, entertainment stores,

restaurants, and several discount stores. The days when my mother, brother, and I walked down there, which was often, if we didn't have a location in mind, we would wander into stores along the way, such as Brown's Shoe Store, Sherwin Williams, and Hasting's Entertainment Store. My favorite, though, was Northgate Home Furnishings, where I browsed in dreamy states, sitting on luxurious microfiber couches and trying out the smooth drawers of armoires. I mentally bought half the store, grabbing armchairs from afar and stuffing them in my pockets.

I was fifteen when the "Everything Must Go!" signs went up at Northgate. Of course, cheaper prices meant we stopped in more often on walks, though still without the thought of purchase, until my mother suggested we look at their mattresses to see just how "rock bottom" the prices were. Here, I discovered the difference between Serta and Sealy, firm and pillow top, innerspring and memory foam. Before, a browse through the mattress section would have included a casual press on random mattresses, as if to pretend the intent to buy. But trips through the mattress section weren't like those in the rest of the furniture store. In contrast to the faux living rooms and bedrooms, the mattress department was devoid of anything that would sway one lifestyle to one mattress (other than the price). Mattresses were simply there, lined up as on a shelf, with only a wall banner of Serta sheep as decoration. It would have been helpful had mattresses been marketed with personalities: put this extra-firm in a cubicle with football memorabilia on the wall and steel-toed boots at the foot; place a plate of grapes on a gold side table and pipe in classical music for the luxury pillow-top; see clothes strewn about the floor around the Tempur-Pedic. But it's not that simple with mattresses. The place where we lay at night is not a reflection of our lifestyle or personality but the way our bodies need to be cradled in our sleep. Some need soft, some need firm, and some need a hard cushion.

Since I knew the firm kind was no longer what my bodied required, I searched out pillow

tops. Knowing I could potentially buy any of them, I went methodically to every model in the store. I set my purse on the floor, sat myself on the mattress, and felt the weight of my legs dangling. Did it have that oomph when I sat? That was the first question. Could it serve also as a couch, be welcoming to a guest, be suitable for shoe-tying?

Laying back on the mattress, I let my full weight bear down and take me. When picking a mattress, you must forget it all—the lights, the lurking salesman, the lack of contact through clothes—and feel the mattress take you, like floating on your back in a pool, accepting and holding what's left of you. Roll over and know that no one would feel it. Roll over into it all and feel your own weight leave you. If you are gone, the mattress is right.

I found a twin-size pillow-top mattress for cheap: a lesser brand for a lesser price. It was what I wanted and what my body felt lost in: right. Thus began my mother's attempt to build my credit. I already had a credit card (not for everyday spending but not for emergencies only, either), so my mother encouraged me to apply for financing, convinced I would get approved since they were so desperate to sell the contents of the store. As part of the going-out-of-business sale, Northgate offered ninety days same-as-cash financing. I sat there on a corduroy couch modeled near the register and jittered my leg as I waited for the verdict on my application, swaying without motion as I silently sank into a dream-sleep on the new mattress more like a cloud.

I got denied.

But my bones were already limp and set for sleep on the pillow-top. Because she knew this, we stopped at the Alco discount store across the street from Northgate on the walk home, and my mother led me to the aisle of foam mattress pads in the back corner of the store. Out and home I walked with a five-dollar, yellow foam egg carton the size of my bed.

At home, as I stripped the sheets down to the grey floral mattress, I would have preferred seeing clean cream with tufts all over the top, but at least the pad feigned new. I unfolded it and needed my mother's help to keep the corners from rolling up and in while I topped it again with covers.

The first night was less like sleeping on air than nicely padded ground, but it helped. A portion of a mattress (just the top) relieved the immediacy for a while. After all, the box springs needed no replacement; the foundation was sound. An additional layer on the top soothed over the packed sand of the mattress, unforgiving to young, worn bones that had known too many heavy backpacks.

Four years later, on one of my first discount-store meanderings with my boyfriend Jedsen, I mentioned that I used a mattress pad on my bed and that it was mostly flat now. I pinched the new twenty-dollar ones through their packaging. They were white and divided into zones: one pattern of raised foam for your upper body, another for your hips, and another for your knees down—even fancier in appearance than a real mattress. For Christmas, just a few weeks later, Jedsen presented me with a cylindrical package wrapped in Santa Claus faces. Annoyingly careful not to rip the paper, I pulled pieces of tape away to reveal a brand new mattress pad—a fancy one with different body zones like we had seen together. This was a man who knew me. The next day, I lumped the old pad in the corner of my room and stretched out the new one, thicker and less carton-like than the other. Again, the old grey mattress was renewed.

I took the twin bed with me to college, and, in those first few apartments, there wouldn't have been room for a larger bed. Then, when I was in my first year of graduate school, my friend Miranda offered me her old pillow-top queen mattress, recently replaced by a sophisticated memory-foam mattress that she and her husband adored. I was quick to say yes to a big bed, an

adult bed, with a pillow top. What I had really wanted all along was a bed larger than a single, a bed to signify the abandonment of childhood, a bed to swallow and hold me rather than provide a mere few feet of sleeping surface.

But when I mentioned getting a queen-sized mattress to my mother, she cried.

“You don’t want your bed anymore? But it’s your bed, and we bought it for you. Why do you need a big bed? You’re not married. Are you?” She cried into the phone, and I was too shocked to respond. Though I had seen this attachment to a bed before—my father—I was not prepared for the attachment to *my* bed, now twenty years old.

She demanded that if I got a new bed, I had to save the twin. I had to save it somehow, get it back down to her in Hutchinson, or make an exchange with Miranda since she had an infant who would one day need a bed, or at least give it to a good home. She asked if Miranda’s father would buy it from me and sell it in his furniture store. She asked if I knew anyone who needed a twin. She asked if I even cared that I grew three feet on it in my sleep.

What was once just a bed, a set of mattresses, became a symbol, perhaps *the* symbol of my adulthood. Here I was rejecting this bed I’d had since I was two, and wasn’t it still good enough for me? I insisted that the bed was too old, worn, and no one would want it. I also reminded my mother that I had wanted a new bed for years and she had once been okay with it, but her doubts gave me doubts. What’s in a mattress? Is it more than a thing on which we sleep? Is sleeping so personal that the mattress must be known, familiar, well-worn?

I must admit I didn’t want to get rid of the twin; I just didn’t want to sleep on it anymore. But there was no room to save it, no reason to store it, so I gave it up without telling my mother my intentions. I went to a local mattress store and bought a box spring and frame to have delivered. I did no shopping, no browsing, just asked for the cheapest thing. But, conscious of

my mother's feelings, I asked them if they removed old beds. "Yes," he said. "What do you do with them?" I had to ask, know, because, though I wouldn't admit this to my mother, I, too, cared where my mattress ended up. Though I was prepared for something new, the memory of the meaning of the mattress wafted, like the scent of the printing plant where my father used to work, and settled on the small bed.

The salesman said the store donated them to a school, to kids who had no beds, when there was the need. Assured that the set would likely go to a good home, I paid the extra ten dollars for the bed to be taken away. But I took pictures of it first, from every angle. I took pictures of myself on the bare mattress, the texture of its blooms reflecting sunlight in the images.

I saw on the news recently that a new "world's tallest man" has been crowned by the *Guinness Book of World Records*. Sultan Kosen of Turkey is eight-feet-one-inch tall. At such heights, I wonder how he sleeps and where he sleeps. The only bed made that would accommodate his size is a Grand King, a novelty size by Select Comfort airbeds, so it's not even a true mattress. Do his limbs just hang over, knees bent at the end of the bed? Or does he have to sleep in a fetal position to stay on the surface? Can he experience sleep on a mattress of his choice?

My grandfather spent the last few weeks of his life at home in bed or slumped over on the couch. He had congenital heart failure, and he hung on but couldn't stay on for long. In those last weeks, my grandmother took charge of him, cleaned him, and cleaned up after him. He couldn't control his body anymore, and things just came out of him, leaving stains in the mattress and couch cushions.

When I was younger, I would sleep over at their house. In the mornings I would climb into bed next to my grandmother and nuzzle against her on the still-warm sheets. We'd lay on our backs and do the bicycle in the air to get our legs moving, back muscles pushing into the mattress. After his death, though he died in the hospital and not at home, my grandmother refused to sleep on their bed. She kept the bedroom's door shut and moved all of her clothes to the guest bedroom, where she slept on what had been her youngest daughter's twin bed.

The childhood bed, the marriage bed, the bed on which we grow: on a mattress, we are renewed in our sleep. We depend on the foundation beneath us to be solid and level, quiet and still. If there is a memory, a depression, or a pea caught up in the mattress, it affects our dreams and ability to rest. We are all tender in our sleep. Cushioned by something known to our bodies but unknown to pain, we may settle into where we sleep and find the position that embraces us in the way we each need to be cradled.

## Mike and the Five-Foot Barbie

Slumber party in your room. At the age of four, your little brother adores you. You read to him and play Trouble with him. He does not want to sleep in his own bed tonight. Your floor will do just fine, the floor parallel to your twin bed. He will sleep, snoring, in his *Toy Story* sleeping bag. You sketch him, propped up on your elbow, as he falls asleep not because you are creepy but because you are nine and love to draw and need a subject. He serves just fine on many a drawing occasion.

Play Barbies together all day in the summer. Don't hate him when he bites all the hair off of the Mike Barbie (teenage boy) and leaves teeth marks in the skull. Go with it. Tell Stacey and all her Barbie pals that Mike's sporting a new look. Let the GI Joe and Barbie go out together in the tractor. They can take the convertible out another night.

Offer to clean his room, paint his room, rearrange his room. He will like it, theoretically, but will bar you from entering his room with his very own arm. He will knock you down if he has to. You will not enter his room, he says. But you will, and you will sketch a new layout. You will make his dream of walls like streets with screeching tire marks in places come to life. You would dust his dresser, if he wouldn't notice, and put all of the quarters laid out in a football formation into the neon-green piggy bank you bought him. Because he kind of trusts you, he will let you help him rearrange his room once. Not again. Not because he doesn't like your concepts but because the concept he did let you carry through was too good.

Take him to a college football game for his birthday. But make him buy both tickets. It's

not that you don't enjoy football and spending time with your brother when you now live one hundred thirty-four miles apart—you do—but you don't enjoy spending fifty-five dollars per ticket on three hours of your life. Let him hang around the stadium for as long as he wants after the game. Let him play your Game Cube when you get back to your apartment and stay up all night watching *Boy Meets World*. Drive him back the next day and wish he'd like school enough to want to go to college near you.

Try to kill him. Out of desire to be an only child again, push him in his infant walker to the ledge of the basement stairs. Give it another nudge and watch it/him tumble to the bottom. Good riddance. Hear your mother's screams as she catches him before the walker actually goes a step down and be relieved that your brother is still there and that he won't remember this because he's too young. Do not kill your brother.

Play defense. After your dream of becoming a basketball star dies (because you're five-foot tall and clumsy running with the ball), defend him on every shot he tries for on the driveway. Challenge him to shooting contests from the middle of the yard, from the porch. Assist him in dunks: toss him the ball at the perfect height at the perfect moment. Photograph him flying into dunks on the playground. Buy him a basketball for his birthday. Buy him a ball return for the rim. Buy him an indoor miniature hoop that goes over the door and watch him use it until his palm is twice the size of the ball. Keep throwing him the ball.

Buy him birthday and Christmas gifts. When no one else does, keep buying him things like digital-music gift cards and sports gear and T-shirts and those comedies he loves. Help him

pick out a big-screen television and arrange his new living space in your parents' basement because you know that he wouldn't do it for himself. Buy him gifts not because he needs anything but because you want him to know you still know him.

Hug him. Even though he's now ten inches taller than you, much more muscular, much quieter, and much wealthier, think "aw" when he leans over to hug you and says, "Thanks for coming." It doesn't happen often. You try not to be too loving-sibling-like because you're a girl and it can too easily get on his nerves. You let him do his thing, and sometimes he comes to you, big sister, and that is when you remember why you like each other, why you get along, why you wanted to take him on his first plane ride and big-city trip to Chicago last summer. Not because he was a good travel companion but because you wanted him to experience life outside Kansas and life off the ground. Hug him, and rub his buzz-cut head for the way it's felt for the last sixteen years. Text him because that's how he gets and gives all his messages these days. A text can do the hugging. But not really.

## Plotting Survival

*I used to stare for hours at prairie dogs,  
which had their town, and folded their little paws  
to stare beyond their fence where I was.*

-- William Stafford, "Prairie Town"

I grew up raking rocks, the ragged screech of brittle metal ringing on in summer air. Mingled with my squeals at spiders stirred, the dirt plumed around my bare ankles and caught in my throat with swallows. Birds and squirrels kept their distance. I dipped in half-squats to gather the surface rocks and toed the ones that wouldn't budge, sweat from my knees creating streams of mud down my calves and drips on the dry stones.

Framed by railroad ties, the six-foot-by-ten-foot plot in the northeast corner of our backyard enclosed petite river rocks left by the former owners of the home. The rocks were packed in, pastels in gradation and contrast. Covered by dirt or forming the foot-bearing layer, the rocks molded with the land from years of rains and wind. Though they still looked out of place in the corner of an otherwise grass-covered yard, the stones settled into their surroundings nicely, as did the weeds that grew over and around them. The rocks, with help from the weeds, seemed to cement themselves in to form a rough base nearly impenetrable by more delicate plants like the whole bag of wildflowers that my mother and I spread out over the plot one year. We had hoped the wildflowers would set themselves between the rocks and cover them, turn the corner of the yard into a haven for cottontails and butterflies. Only a few took seed. The weeds won out, and the rocks remained on display.

The wildflowers failed, but my father didn't mind. He wanted a garden, a vegetable garden, with tomatoes and green peppers to start. Though he seemed to care little for my mother's flowers thriving in the front porch planter, he wanted to grow and gather vegetables in armfuls and line them on the kitchen counter. He wanted to work the land, like he had watched

his grandfather do in a backyard garden. My father had observed his grandfather from a distance, dirt accumulating in the soles of his shoes but not his fingernails, as the bent man uprooted turnips and carrots, lettuce and strawberries. But though his family had settled in Kansas several generations ago, none of his ancestors began their Kansas histories as farmers—that commitment to growth. As gardeners, the work was personal, a hand-to-leaf relationship, and the knowledge that all it took was care to grow. For my father, though he had admired his grandfather's garden and the buckets of produce in kitchen corners, his want of homegrown food very well might have been born out of his disdain for grocery shopping, a task which left him nervous and claustrophobic.

The back plot of rocks was perfect for a garden, set off from the yard by the ties and in direct sunlight. In anticipation, my father bought a stack of tomato cages and leaned them against the back of the garage. But first, he put my brother and me to work removing the rocks. We took rakes to the plot, combing the surface to unsettle the pebbles, but our little arms couldn't apply the pressure needed to stir them properly. The ones that did pop loose we plopped into buckets waiting to be taken to pile onto the rock trail next to the house—the proper place for rocks. For those that wouldn't budge, we knelt down on the pastels and picked them loose with our fingers, chipping our nails until our legs went numb. Once there were empty pockets in the dirt, we set to raking again.

The cycle continued—the raking, the digging, the hauling—for a few summers. It was a lazy process, one that began with fervor once or twice a summer and then fizzled when the frustration of never-ending layers of rocks set in and my father decided to forget about the garden until the next year. Cycles of rains and snow worked the rocks out, each time revealing a new layer, a new top to the plot, reminding us that our work would start fresh the next summer.

During the ongoing, start-and-stop removal of rocks, I, too, decided I wanted to make my own plot of land. In fourth grade, the local Nature Center visited our class bearing two-foot trees, maple and pecan, to turn our thumbs green. The man lined our classroom with the trees, just miniature sticks in plastic pots with those paper stakes holding information on how to care for them. I instantly knew I wanted the tree that bore food and envisioned pecans plotted across the backyard, fallen from my own sprawling tree. I carried the tree the two blocks home from the elementary school, took it inside, and set it on the dining-room table.

The backyard lay before me from the sliding glass door behind the table, and I began mathematically planning for a growing tree, considering its full-grown spread and expanse of root system. The perfect spot, I thought, would be to the west of center in order to still allow for direct sunlight on my father's future garden. When I pointed it out to my father, hugged the sapling to my chest and told him about the pecans we would have, he shook his head. He claimed it would grow too large in the backyard, that it would touch the power lines, that it would disrupt the open flow and be too much work. I said okay, I understood, and, after some more calculations, offered to plant it in the front yard between the two elms so that our house would ultimately be hidden from the street. I leaned the shovel against the garage wall in preparation for my work.

No, he said, it would be too much, and he didn't want to mow around it as it grew. It would litter the yard, he said. Frustrated, I asked if I could plant it on my uncle's land outside of town, where it could grow and thrive and not be bothered by mowers and hanging power lines. But no one ever asked him for me, and I held on to the hope that it would end up outside my window where I could watch pecans fall, if that's even how it works.

It sat in its pot on the front porch, wilting, browning more every time I walked past it.

I didn't let it go so easily. I kept asking, kept suggesting spots for it, but I kept getting refused. Across the street, my neighbor and classmate planted hers, a maple, on the corner. Her father straightened it with a stake and string, surrounded it with straw, and carefully mowed around it every time. It grew as mine died. My pecan died on the front porch, still in its pot, unmoved and unplanted.

We walked when I was young, down main streets and back streets, to the grocery store and to church and to parks. We walked not necessarily for exercise or purpose but for the pleasure of the journey. My mother, brother, and I walked with a little red plastic wagon and became known for it. "You're the one who walks everywhere with your kids, aren't you?" My mother would often get recognized as the town walker, and people would stop her on the street to offer her rides, which she always declined.

When I got older and refused to walk in town where people could see me and recognize me as the daughter of the town walker, my mother and I walked along the Little Arkansas River on the Sunflower Trail. The River—more like a creek—ran along, mostly at a trickle until it hit the slightly more trickling Arkansas River and flowed into and through Carey Park. This was the wildest part of my hometown, other than the well-kept Nature Center on the other side. Here, the trees grew into one another, and the trails were crossed by spider webs and dotted with deer tracks. Here, squirrels had their choice of acorns and plenty of burial options every autumn. Here, your footsteps could be covered by leaves and forgotten in a matter of minutes.

On second thought, several other areas in town were wild to a different degree. I remember three locations, specifically, that were bare dirt but covered in holes occupied by black-tailed prairie dogs—plump, squirrel-like, short-tailed creatures that stood on their hind legs

and stared at you as you drove or walked by. I loved seeing them pop out of their holes, touch noses with fellow scamperers, stare, and go about their eating. They had their town within my own, surrounded by pavement and brick buildings.

These creatures even had their own miniature town bordered by cement in Carey Park's petting zoo. Two prairie dogs lived in a dirt enclosure open to the elements below the pens for hawks and eagles (to mimic the natural food chain). Behind the enclosure was a pass-through with other small animals (also prey for the birds) on display, but what was most exciting to me as a child was the tunnel that went under and through the prairie dogs' land. I could crawl on my hands and knees through the plastic tunnel, and, at two points along the way, I could stand up into a clear bubble, on the surface, face to face with a prairie dog. I, and every child, was then a part of the display, an honorary prairie dog popping up with different faces. From the bubble, I watched them nibble carrots and waddle in their own way over to a hole. As seemingly friendly as they were, they were also timid, shying away from children's hands tapping on the bubbles' interior. It was clear they liked their town, their togetherness, and didn't care much for the intrusion of children or plastic, but as local residents, their "little folded paws," as William Stafford would say, were always on exhibition.<sup>19</sup>

In a way, the prairie dog was the unofficial town animal (rodent), as postcards proudly featured their postured yellowish fur on grocery- and gift-store racks. My Uncle Roger even gave me prairie-dog-themed stationery for Christmas one year: a landscape of a windmill, rolling green Kansas hills, and perched prairie dogs. But, as with anything, those that we claim as our own often go unprotected.

In one part of town, the city council planned a baseball field on the land where prairie dogs lived. While several on the council voted to simply kill the animals to clear the land for the

field, one resident urged a group from Colorado to come and save them. Earth First! agreed, eager to help these creatures that are too often exterminated for their diet of grass or decisions to dig towns in inconvenient locations for city dwellers or farmers. The group flooded the holes with a mixture of water and biodegradable dish soap to irritate the prairie dogs' eyes and force them to the surface. As they climbed out of their holes, soapy and struggling, the prairie dogs were captured and caged in three separate batches to be taken to the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge an hour away.

At Quivira, they were provided with starter holes and protected under chicken wire and steel water troughs until they could dig out and make their new town. The first group of seventy-six prairie dogs was killed by predators within weeks, as was the second group of forty-four. Due to long grass or too many years in the city, they weren't prepared for natural enemies. Hawks, foxes, and badgers ate them up before they even made the holes their home, so Earth First! changed plans. The third batch of seventeen, the last of them, were released instead in an existing prairie dog town on the Refuge, and nobody knows how many adapted and lived.

I remember two houses in particular on the walk down 30<sup>th</sup> Street. Both were white, old, with two stories, an attic, and a front sitting porch. One sat surrounded by trees on a corner, and the other stood as the one last historical piece on its part of the street. Along the sidewalk in front of the latter was a stone divide, about two feet high, that was the perfect balance beam for my brother and me as we walked by. It was our favorite part of the walk, the jump up and running on its foot of width. The house itself was set back from the street, still preserved, to a certain degree, from the encroaching black pavement. A ditch and trees swerved to the left and behind, and the grass, which we sometimes ventured onto over the stone, was filled with burrs, stickers that held

on to your shoelaces and socks, that pricked you when you pulled them off. The lawn was not fully green. It was allowed to run over with Bermuda grass and burrs. It was alive and made sure you knew it.

In the mid 1990s, a bank bought the land and fated the house to rubble or relocation. The owners, thankfully, elected to move the house, picking it up and carrying it down 30<sup>th</sup>, slowly, to somewhere in the country where it could continue to live amongst stickers. A photographer for the newspaper captured the scene, this staple of a house being removed and carried out of town like an old trend. The photo printed in the paper captured my brother and me, too, sitting on the corner and watching it go. Tom and I discussed what fun it would be to ride in the house as it passed, waving at the onlookers from the attic window, but we feared the floors would fail beneath our feet without the foundation of the ground. So we lifted the walls with our minds, willed them to hold up until they touched the ground once more. On the empty lot, they removed the stone wall, tore out trees, and paved over the burrs.

I spend a lot of my time walking on and around a campus now. One night, as I walked home across the stadium parking lot, headed for a small trail (shortcut) through a wooded area, an orange figure with sharp eyes caught my own: a fox. I took the long way around, not wanting to chance a close encounter. I didn't know the temperament of foxes. Was it staring at me as food or friend? I stared back, though carefully shifting my eyes from time to time to show I wasn't threatening. It trotted along on a higher level of the hill but kept up parallel to me. I wanted to touch it, welcome it as a friend, tell it how amazing it was for surviving on a university campus, next to a fraternity of all places. Instead, again for safety, I took the lower route that cut me from its sight. I kept looking back, and I could tell it was watching me until I couldn't see the spot of orange anymore.

And then it was gone, swallowed by the trees. I wish I could say I have seen it again, that I know its intentions now. But I still look for it, the flash of white on the tail. The old white house I did see in its new location on some land just north of town, though it was unrecognizable. Remodeled, remolded, modernized. The same house in new clothes, surrounded by like trees but no stone divide. The owners somehow brought the old and new together, found a balance between the reason for saving it from destruction and the need for common luxuries and looks.

I've always gotten a thrill out of telling people, "My grandma's from Australia" or "I'm part Aussie," as if Australia were the equivalent of Neptune. I did multiple reports on Australia in school, including a sixth-grade science project called "Kangaroos, Koalas, and Kookaburras" and a ninth-grade foam Aussie flag as a visual aid for my research project on the Australian government, and boasted that these were "my people." I felt privileged. Never mind my classmate who immigrated from Mexico or my friend Becky whose *father* was from Australia (one better than my quarter-blood). It mattered to me that there was a wild, foreign stream running through my veins. Even if I couldn't call on it, it was there.

But, truth is, my grandmother's parents were from England. So, actually, the blood isn't even Aussie. It's just plain English. Proof? My translucent white skin. You can see the veins in my chest, my thighs, the underside of my arms. My grandmother's skin is like mine, seemingly thin. She grew up in Rockhampton, Queensland, a town just forty minutes by car from the Coral Sea. She was working at a bicycle-rental store in 1944 when she met my grandfather, a U.S. soldier protecting the east coast of Australia in World War II. She left it all for him, came to America in 1946 when my grandfather was home and out of the service—a war bride, foreign in

the heart of Kansas, placed in the center of wind and no water.

I was born on her sixty-second birthday, forty years after her arrival in Hutchinson. Although much of her strong Aussie accent has melded into only a slight accent, it remains obvious that she is not a native Kansan. No, her accent is some mix of Aussie and Kansan, at once foreign and familiar, and I have always wanted it. I have always wanted to capture it and claim it as my own.

Some people have thought that she is from New England because she does not pronounce her R's in some instances, but she always insists on her true origins. She tends to hold out her vowels, especially A's, as in "army." She pronounces it "ahmy." It is as if she is holding out the beginning of the letter R without actually saying it—her tongue never touches the roof of her mouth to complete the sound. However, in certain words, she does pronounce the R: "air" and "here" come out with a little loop after the R, a hint of "uh." I love the way "Kari" comes out "cairy" and "library" comes out "lybairy" when my grandmother says them. Like it's better to focus on the breezy, airy part of the word. Hold out the "air" for a few more split seconds like it's nothing but everything. That's definition. That's holding on to an accent sixty-four years after you left its environment. That's survival.

Apartment living provides little suitable space for growing plants, particularly my patio with its ample corners and long ledge but no sun except for twenty minutes on the east upper ledge in the early morning. In anticipation of moving to a new apartment with a less-shaded patio, I researched perennials, potted plants, patio vegetables. I had an insuppressible urge to help things grow, so I bought three varieties of hostas and several annuals, along with pots and potting soil, and spent an evening in May planting. I studied the paper stakes for proper soil

depth and spacing and matched each plant with a pot. As a trick I learned in order to provide footing for the roots, I went down to the plots near the parking lot at dusk and filled the bottom quarter of each pot with rocks. Like my father's garden had once been, the river rocks were used as maintenance-free decoration, and most were loose for the taking.

When in the mountains, I have gathered rocks. In Colorado, I picked one up off the side of the road by dinosaur tracks. In Switzerland, at Mount Pilatus, I promised my brother a rock from the peak. It was snowing, and we couldn't see for the two hundred miles that was claimed in the travel guide, but I climbed some stairs and chose several dark, flat rocks from the side of the mountain. They were black, and I searched for ones with toothed edges half the size of my palm. I carried them back in my raincoat pockets, wet from snow and shedding sediment. I carried them home to Kansas and handed them—all but one—to my brother, the residue still in the creases of the pockets.

My gathered rocks now accompany my travel photos and souvenirs on bookcases in my living room in Lawrence. They are dark, light, jagged, and bubbly. One is a rock that my grandmother brought back from Australia when she finally made it home for a short visit two years ago. But I don't remember which is which, what rock came from which mountain range or continent. I can't point at a rock and say it came from Pilatus or Rockhampton or a road outside Denver. And I know that none of them are river rocks from my parents' backyard.

Even now, after a dozen seasons of plump tomatoes and green peppers, with several rounds of cantaloupe and strawberries, you can still find rocks in my father's garden, somehow rising to the surface, pushed up by roots or exposed by rain. I leave them there, little spots of pastel amid the dirt and leaves. I removed all I could when I was young and eventually removed myself.

## On the Surface

The sun set into smoke the first time, a fluke. Controlled burns blanketed the Konza Prairie in April, and the black line of burnt grass met the road. I had gone there, six miles south of Manhattan, to the Scenic Overlook, the gazebo on the west side of K-177 that I had passed countless times, to write. I needed inspiration for a story, and landscape was the only answer.

At five o'clock, I sat against the stone of the gazebo and wrote about a boy (a character) who had to leave Kansas. I was supposed to write a *risky* story, one that I had never tried before, so I chose point-of-view and wrote through the eyes of a man. Below, the ripples of the smoke reminded me of waves, the ocean, even though I had not been, so I placed my character on a sidewalk outside his estranged mother's home and planned for him to end up on the beach, free.

Cars rolled in, holding more than casual stoppers, and flanked the circumference of the road. They set tripods and walked out into the grasses, pointed west. Their lenses were large, professional, and they checked their viewfinders as the sun lowered, readied.

My character had not made it beyond the end of the road, away from his mother's house, but I stopped writing and caught the colors as they sank faster than I'd known them to do from the city. Startled at my view, I dropped my notebook and took out my camera to join the others on the edge.

The cool breeze brushed hair across my eyes and seeped in through my jacket sleeves. Though the air was pregnant with smoke below, the wind carried only the sweet smell of grass and earth up to our perches on the burnt rim of the hill. With my point-and-shoot camera, I captured the bits of charred sticks in the frame, crouching down to combine landscape and sun, to create a foreground, some point of reference. The sun was cupped in a palm of peach above the hills, a faded wafer on the horizon. Like the tide, smoke lifted from the valley and masked

the distance. Burning big blue stem and little blue stem, burning Indian grass, burning switch. The only color, sky.

I walked from edge to edge but not down and followed the other point-and-shooters who knew their way around. It was dark then, monochromatic. With no light for writing, I left, my character still complaining about hating the ocean as he stood on a sidewalk near Humboldt Bay in California.

It is January and clear, ground covered in fresh snow. We wait for sunset from the car, for the colors swept out on the Konza, because the wind is too much out here in the open. I had told Jedsen we would come here together the first time, but I had needed inspiration and so had come without him. Now, months later, he tells me it is a mistake waiting for the sunset on a cloudless day. There is no smoke or clouds for the sun to use, he says. But he wants to stay.

The five o'clock sun blanks the sky, but we keep squinting back at the absence of orange, hoping for hints of pink through the car window. Instead, we save sunspots—bright, outlined white with my eyes closed, purple against grounded snow. The damage is irreversible, yet painless on the surface. We compare the shapes our sunspots make: mine is an arrow, a mass of dots in a semblance of line and tip, pointing up; his, a rectangular circle thing that might resemble the symbol for male.

He turns down my car's radio, tells me my pupils are tiny and strange. He pities their smallness. I can't see through the speckled mess to his pupils, to find them shrunken, too.

## No Why

“You can’t ask *why*,” he told me, “and you can’t answer *why*.” Greg sat across from me in his office chair, rocking to a silent rhythm, as he explained this, my first homework, for the two weeks until my next counseling appointment.

“Okay.” I stiffened in my chair. This was not the kind of homework I was expecting. My first counselor had told me to write a letter to my mother and never send it or to write a double-sided poem, with one side acknowledging her feelings and the other side explaining mine. I hadn’t done either.

“Do you know why?”

I paused, bit the inside of my cheek and started down at the gray-speckled carpet of his office. It seemed so obvious to him, this perfect homework assignment for the girl wrought with anxiety, and he twiddled his fingers on the arm of the chair as he waited for my answer.

I shook my head, unable to figure out what I had said to lead to this kind of task.

“Really? Well, it’s like this. If you ask someone ‘why?’ you don’t really want to know the answer. It’s an attack. For instance, ‘Why were you late to dinner?’ You don’t want to know why. What you are truly saying is ‘You were late to dinner, and I’m not happy about it.’”

“Oh.”

I asked for a piece of paper and wrote it down. *No why*, I wrote. *It’s an attack*.

We had been talking about my parents and my need to change things. A few months earlier, I had even tried to convince my mother to divorce my father, to do something to stop their collective misery. I tried to talk my father into selling his record collection just to get it out of the dank basement. There were original Beatles albums down there, after all, and I had potential buyers. *Why do you live like this?* was the perpetual question from an outsider now able

to see my life and home for twenty years at a distance. None of it made sense. Not the carpet, not the five cats, not the lack of books.

The lack of adult books is startling to me now. My mother read to me and my brother when we were young from the small bookshelves in our respective rooms. Some of those books are in the warped yellow case in the basement, alongside my mother's several romances and the few young adult books carried over from my mother's youth. Others are in a box somewhere deeper in the basement.

The milky, yellow bookcase, lined with rainbow-plaid contact paper, was once mine. In gallery format, with six oblong or L-shaped shelves rather than the traditional straight planks, it held mass market paperbacks that I could hold in one hand and the larger, near-folio books, like *The Land Before Time* and several of the Time-Life imitation leather books on *Indians* and *Pirates*. On a weekend visit, as I shifted the bookcase along the wall to move it deeper into the basement, rocking it in inches, my fingers seemed to sink into the wood and collect yellow prints. From the upper right, the smallest shelf, alongside *Happy Holisters and the Haunted House Mystery*, *The Babysitter's Club #67: Dawn's Big Move*, and *The Boxcar Children: Mystery in the Sand*, I pulled out a book with a plum spine: *If the Dinosaurs Came Back* by Bernard Most, a book in which all of the dinosaurs were the only color—neon—while the illustrated scenes and people were black and white, drawn with no shading. But had I fixed that. As a child, I was intent on filling in color where there was none, and so I took markers to much of the rest, coloring in the world with vivid shades. And on the dedication page, my name is scrawled in purple marker in all capitals and cursive from binding to fore-edge, with Tom's name (then Tommy) smaller across the bottom in my handwriting, too. It seems I felt the need to take a break from reading to my brother to decorate the book and label it mine, along with so

many other things on which I had written my name during that stage (closet doors, Scrabble pieces, ice-cream containers).

“If the dinosaurs came back, they could help librarians get books from the top shelf,” reads the page with a purple Iguanodon handing a book down to a librarian from the top of the tallest stacks I’ve ever seen. “What would happen if the dinosaurs returned?” asks the back cover. The little boy believes not destruction but good would result: “They could help build skyscrapers and catch lost kites. They could push away rain clouds and plow farmers’ fields. And giraffes would have someone to look up to . . . .”

About the time the cockroach began dragging its limp limbs toward me, I wondered whether moving storage containers and warped dressers around the basement was actually a good idea. It first gleamed bronze in the dim light of the bare bulb from behind a container marked “School.” Plumper than seemed possible, the nearly two-inch insect reared back at first, toward more containers behind the dry bar, before skirting the baseboards of the bar and trailing them out into the open. As it scurried, I demanded my mother bring me the Raid before it found hiding again, and hunched from a distance as I soaked its shell. My finger didn’t let up on the nozzle, intent on killing the creature in one continuous spray, and a pool of poison trailed it as it moved, mostly un-phased, toward my feet and the open basement.

I had volunteered to clean my parents’ basement, or at least the main, finished part of it, to make space for my brother’s futon and new thirty-two-inch flat-screen TV. The Cave, as it would later become known, with its original paneled walls, beige/brown checkered tile floor, and no windows, had evolved over the years from a play room for us and the kids my mother babysat to a recycling center and miniature grocery store. As children, my brother and I had spent hours

playing Barbies and listening to the radio, particularly the summer of 1998 when I was thirteen and Tom was nine. We had spent that summer underground, caught up in our own world of Ken in fatigues and 'N Sync's harmonized "yeah-eh-ehs."

But as we grew older and moved steadily into the solitude of our own bedrooms, my mother began to claim the basement as her own. Blue and black plastic bags replaced the Little Tykes kitchen. Laundry baskets with broken handles, filled with clear water bottles or my father's flattened pop cans, inched out the stacks of Matchbox cars. The Barbies went into boxes, and the built-in shelving unit transformed from Barbie's penthouse to shelves of clearance products, from liquid soap to cookie mixes to boxes of Ziploc baggies, all front-faced on display, with paper boxes of yet more products on the floor below: paper towels, cereal, shampoo. If it was on sale, clearanced, or discontinued at the grocery store my mother walked to nearly every day, she bought it and brought it home to shelve. Some items she bought with the intention to donate to the women's shelter or food bank, others she planned to have on hand for me to choose from when I came to visit from college, and others she got for a future occasion of need. Her collections of recycling and goods-in-waiting spilled out from the shelves and over the floor, not into clutter but ragged organization, dandelion seeds spread out in a purposeful randomness.

My brother wanted to reclaim a portion of the basement for his own. He had only recently returned to sleeping in his bedroom after a two-year spell on the living-room couch, falling asleep each night to the blaring television, when I took on the basement to make room for him. Though by this time I was living elsewhere in Kansas, his choice of the privacy-less living room as his sleeping quarters had puzzled me, to say the least. "Do you want a TV in your bedroom? Do you need your bedroom rearranged? Do you want to paint your bedroom?" I asked, trying to find his motivation for abandoning his bed. "No," was his answer. "Why?" He

responded with a shrug and went back to the sunken, woven sofa.

At eighteen, a new high-school graduate with no plans for college, Tom decided to buy his own television (a purchase my father had been planning for a decade and never made)—not for his bedroom but for the basement. Downstairs, covered with blankets for the occasional darkness-loving cat and several small bags of empty water bottles, a beige futon that had originally been bought for my now-empty bedroom was destined to become the couch to a new television.

As I surveyed the basement during the setting up of the television, Tom's miniature childhood desk serving as the stand, I pictured him stretched out on the futon watching ESPN in high definition, sacks of paper and bottles circling. "Why don't you separate your stuff from Mom's recycling?" I asked. He stared.

"I'll clean for you," I offered. And, to my surprise, both my mother and brother agreed.

My father worked as a printer for thirty-three years, mostly doing directories and then books and textbooks. His hands were perpetually ink-stained and chapped, and his steel-toed boots were marked in black. Directories for Detroit, Michigan, would sit on our buffet table, leftovers claimed by my father. When the textbook printing began in the last few years of his plant's functioning, he brought home defective algebra textbooks and an Italian workbook, books he thought would help me in high school. (I was taking French).

He brought home bound blank books, cloth covers with thick-weighted pages. In one I started a journal, but it turned into a scrapbook of high school and college basketball articles.

He brought home several history books and an entertainment book on *Star Trek*, one of his favorite science-fiction shows. He never read them.

Now he is on the maintenance staff at my former high school. Since he started less than a year ago, he has brought home unclaimed lost-and-found items, as well as things thrown away in the renovation of the school. He collected a stapler, a T-shirt, an “Aussie” cowboy hat I wore in marching band, an HHS rag to wave at football games, and several sets of full-size lockers that once flanked the hallways of C-Hall, the science building. For me, he claimed a nearly new “I [heart] Paris” black hooded sweatshirt, and a few months ago, he sent a rare email, an act new to him in the last year, saying he’d found some coffee-table books for me. The next time I was in Hutchinson, he gave me three folio books of impressionism: Van Gogh, Monet, Manet. They were in good condition with dust jacket and common bumping to the corners. Inside, the name of my freshmen-honors world history teacher, Mr. Ray. They had been thrown away, my father said, and he had pulled them out of the trash.

The first time my boyfriend Jedsen got angry with me, I was working on the computer at the community-college library where we both tutored English. With our first Valentine’s Day approaching, a holiday I had never before celebrated, I told him that I was scheduled to work from five to seven that night and that I could see him afterward. He startled me as he rose from his chair on my right, and his face changed into a stone as he looked down on me.

“Why wouldn’t you ask off for our first Valentine’s Day?”

“I did,” I muttered, “but they scheduled me, and it’s only two hours.”

“But it’s still work. Why don’t you care enough to not work on our first Valentine’s Day?”

Why? Why did you do that? The signal for attack. The signal for me to go silent and swim in my head, losing ground and words. The shock of anger directed at me from someone

other than my mother, someone I loved but had yet to experience the range of emotions with, shut me down. *Why*, as I rang my eyes back to search my mind while I stared startled at Jedsen's still face. *Why*, as a song, one that I hated, took over in repetition to give me rhythm and drown out the searching. *Why*, with eyes flooded and memory for responding with words gone. I grasped in the dark for anything that would get me out, Gollom's ring to make me invisible until I could come out on the other side of the mountain, both of us smiling.

This grappling in confrontation still plagues me when I'm caught off guard, a defense my body and mind employ when I fear the fights of my parents. Their attacks always began in *why's* and ended with fists. I feared Jedsen's fists, even though I trusted he'd never hit me. And the fear always began with the first *why*. But for two weeks during my homework assignment, as I explained to Jedsen right after I left the counselor's office, I got out of answering *why*. "I can't answer that," I'd tell Jedsen. "Please rephrase the question."

The first few days of the experiment brought me relief from both sides of the question: the burden of asking, and the shock of responding. The attacker and the attacked were silenced.

I caught myself in conversations with my mother. *Why* won't you use the new phone and answering machine I got you? *Why* won't you visit me? *Why* aren't you looking for a job to help Dad? The ban on *why's* forced me to rephrase, to rethink, to investigate. *How's* replaced *why's*. I thought back to a rant I'd had about my uncle a few weeks prior: *why* hadn't he just not looked at the girl so he wouldn't have had any grounds for being fired? If I took out the *why*, the person became the subject of the question and not the accusation. It had been a misunderstanding, after all.

I used this new method in mediation with my parents in September while I was in Hutchinson for another brief visit. I had brought down my old desktop computer for my father so

that he would have his own computer and could return the laptop he was borrowing from my grandfather.

“Do you want it?” I asked, the monitor hugged to my chest.

“I guess,” he shrugged.

“Where?”

“Not in the living room or your old bedroom,” my mother shouted from the kitchen. I rolled my eyes, and my father shrugged again, grinned for one second as if to say *this is how I live*. We didn’t yell back, but I told him to follow me into their bedroom, the only other option.

Furniture lined the walls around the centered bed. There was hardly an open inch of wall or floorboard, and under the west window sat a table he had saved from Polk, where he had been a printer. Defunct stereo equipment (radio and record player, a set, from his twenties) and the laptop were on the table, covered in old shirts to protect them from cats and dust.

“Let’s set it up on the table,” I offered, and set the monitor on the bed.

“We’ll do it later,” he said, though he didn’t leave the room. But I wasn’t satisfied with the crowded room and the resignation to add a desktop computer to the clutter.

“Or we could put the table in my old room, that way you have more space,” I suggested, even though my mother had already ruled it out. My former bedroom was unused except as a kitty-litter room now, with my dresser and desk left as the only furniture, still displaying stuffed animals and pictures of me as a teenager. Though my brother used the closet as storage for his Dairy Queen shirts and khaki pants, where he was a shift manager, the room, still a washed violet like I left it, felt abandoned and empty of use.

“Talk to your mother,” he said, and walked back down the hall to watch college football in the living-room. I followed him a few feet and stopped in the doorway of my room. The blinds

were closed, yet the day was bright, showing in a pale glow through the white slats. I raised them to the top and breathed in the sun as I called for my mother. The room warmed, which made it feel less bare.

“You don’t usually open the blinds all the way like that, do you? I thought you just turned them open,” my mother said, as she straightened a stack of magazines on the desk.

I nodded and scrunched my eyebrows. “Almost always.”

“So,” I began, and walked out of the sun to get closer to her. “I think the table would work in here. This could be Dad’s office.”

No, my mother insisted, shaking her head, the table cannot go in here. My mind jumped to Why? Why can’t it be used? I crossed my arms and studied the bleach spots on her grey hooded sweatshirt. It would have been easy to assail her with why’s, questions grounded in the irrational nature of what I believed her insistence to be. I thought it would honor me quite nicely to use my old bedroom as an office, considering what I do now, but instead of attacking her and getting nowhere with why’s, I asked, “What is it about the table that you don’t want in the bedroom?” She stopped shaking her head and knelt down on the floor to pick at her sneakers.

“Because of the way I found it,” she said. “It was your birthday, and I got back from being with Grandma (it was her birthday too), walked into the room, and this ugly table was up against the windows in your room.” She choked. Tears swelled suddenly, and her mouth turned back into the desperation cry I had seen so many times before. “I didn’t even know he had it. He’d kept it a secret from me for three years and stored it in his parents’ basement. Then it just showed up that day, and I hated it, I hated it. I hated it in here. So I made him move it to our bedroom.”

“But there’s so much more space in my bedroom, and now your room is so crowded—

wouldn't it work better and look better in my room?"

"I don't want it in here. It's not going in here, and neither is that computer."

"But I could make the arrangement work. We can move the dresser to the corner, diagonal, and the table would look great here, centered." I held my arms the width of the table. "Plenty of room."

She again shook her head, one hand hard on her hip and the other rubbing her forehead as she bent over her knees. After more questions, her crying, I began to see her as a protector of the past and a guardian of the sacred. None of this was irrational to her.

"Is it that you think it'll make me unhappy to see the room being used by my dad? Are you protective of it and think that I am, too?" I tried to explain to her that I had no reservations about giving up that room. I was already sleeping in my brother's old bedroom when I came home because there was no longer a bed in this room. "I'm fine," I repeated. "I'm more than fine with this room being used. I don't need it or want it any more. I will never live in this room or this house again."

"Think about it," I said, and left the room to talk to my father on the couch.

"Don't tell him anything," she called out to me, loud enough for him to hear.

I sat down on the other end of the couch from my father, and the cushion squeaked until I settled. After several minutes of silence, I asked him who he was rooting for in the football game. "Oh, it doesn't matter," he said and patted the cat on his lap. She purred and lifted her chin back to him.

"Do you know why Mom doesn't want the table in there?" I whispered, and warmed my hands between my legs in the dim room. He whispered, pointing toward the hall, that he didn't understand why she got so mad about the table. She had screamed and cried at him when she

found it, he said, and they hadn't talked about it since he put it in their bedroom.

I sighed and felt hopeless as I had as a teenager, when I had took on the role of mediator between my parents during their awful fights. I would go from one parent to the other, asking each one "What do you want?" I would write up notes and then try to get them to sit at the dining-room table with me so that we could come to a compromise. Because letting them yell but not communicate was not an option, I had pushed for resolutions once the physical fight was over and they had resigned to ignoring each other. The fighting had stopped, then, so I felt it was safe to leave my room and reintroduce words. But it had always been *my* words and not theirs. I had pressed them to come together and change, and, every time, it had ended in "we can't."

Empty of words and energy for mediation, I went to their room alone and sat on the bed, facing the table. I reached out to touch its grooves, the scratches and black indentations from use at the plant. My father sat on this table when he ate lunch, and when I visited him as a child, approaching from behind, I saw first his legs swinging like pendulums from the table as he ate, his bologna sandwich in one hand and a Shasta Cola in the other. The big plant smelled of chemicals and ink, and the grand chinking of the machines and the palates of paper created its own mythology for me. I loved visiting him, loved the smell—his smell—and I imagined the old scene as I traced a groove from corner to corner. Though my father would never say so, I know he saved this table for the memories—not of a beloved job but of thirty-three years doing a job he knew and understood.

My mother went back and forth on the table but never forward. I set up the computer on the table in their bedroom and put my father's stereo equipment on the floor by their door. She told me to make him promise not to leave them there like junk, and she said if the table did eventually get moved into my bedroom he had to promise the room wouldn't be used as storage,

that it become storeroom like the back rooms of the basement. “Tell him to promise,” she told me. So I did. And he said he of course wouldn’t turn the room into storage and that he still intended to fix the equipment, though it would be expensive. I left it at that.

Several months later, my mother called and said the equipment was still on the floor in their bedroom, where I’d left it. She had thought my father would keep a promise to me, his daughter.

“Did you tell him how you feel about it?” I asked.

She hadn’t, and I explained that I don’t live there, so promises to me don’t hold weight.

“It’s all between you two,” I said. “You have to talk if you want feelings known. Not commands, not attacks, but discussion.”

*We can’t, we can’t* was the reply on both ends.

We can’t communicate.

It’s on you.

The cockroach finally expired, soaked through, near a scratched lamp stand in the basement. I had bent over the insect, looming over the lone issue, until its legs stopped fluttering, finished. That afternoon, I sorted through twelve years of saved school work and agendas, finally tossing handmade desk nametags from fourth grade, my own and several of my friends’ that I had forgotten I’d collected. I arranged the recycling bags and containers in front of the dry bar and hid storage containers (more “School”) behind. My mother helped me sweep the cat hair and insect shells from the baseboards, along with the few rabbit pebbles left over from our pet rabbit Millie, who had lived free-range in the basement a decade ago. When we finished, the space looked more purposeful, with designated areas for products, recyclables, and my brother. As I

headed upstairs, tattered folders with old papers I couldn't toss clutched in my arms, my brother lay on the futon, feet toppled over the end, with his neck bent hard right to watch his favorite show larger than he'd ever seen it. His eyelids bobbed, a slow sleepy blinking, with one hand ready on the near-empty sports-drink bottle on the floor.

## Clearance

I had been looking for nothing in particular, as it was a casual Saturday evening with my boyfriend Jedsen, and we happened to end up at Target to browse for, really, nothing in particular. I browsed the handbags and scarves and found a plethora of clearance items and then, facing a main aisle, eyed three burgundy fedoras hung cupped together from a peg among gloves and newsboy caps. I pulled one off to feel the texture, the lines. Felt, and stiff where it should be, with rises and dips and slight lift to the back brim. Too svelte for clearance. I don't think I had ever held a fedora before—not a real one, anyway. No one in my family wears hats. I don't wear hats. I don't *know* hats. I had never bought a hat before, but I had bought caps (baseball, beanie), so when I came across the fedora, I don't know why I was instantly drawn to it.

It felt sturdy in my hands as I examined the shape, and I found the orange clearance sticker on the dangling tag inside: \$3.24. For about three dollars, I couldn't resist taking it across the aisle to the jewelry department with its mini-mirrors to see what I could look like. It's at a time like this when practicality doesn't play in. *Clearance* speaks louder than *conservation of funds*, the saving of three dollars that could buy nearly four pounds of bananas or a month and a half of filtered water out of a pitcher or just over a gallon of gas to get me home.

I have a chin-length bob with bangs, and for winter with this nine-month-old “fringe,” I have been mourning my inability to wear beanies like before. I live in Lawrence, in Kansas, and in winter's constant cold and wind, I crave the closeness of knit pulled down over my ears—“to keep the heat in,” my mother always said. For most of my life, I have refused head-coverings to keep my “cool” image that was never, ever cool but always composed of stinging, cold-burnt ears. Not even a hood. Seldom a knit band. Definitely not the ear muffs like my mother wore, a

half-halo of baby blue fur. Never a beanie.

But then winter clearance came one year in December, and I—wary of the pain behind the ears when the wind seems to penetrate the eardrum and accumulate in a pocket deep, back, inside—bought a beanie from Target (yes) for what must have been a dollar and, perhaps, twenty-four cents. It was simple: the kind of green spring leaves strive for, no pattern, no pom-pom, no cuff, soft. I instantly fell for its *snuggness*. I wore it coming, going, and sometimes staying. Often, I kept it on, or just put it on, at home. Picture me vacuuming in a green beanie, warm up there, in bare feet. If I could get away with it, I kept it on at work where I was mostly alone thumbing through and appraising books. I kept it on for safety—from wind, from the frizzy mess of matted hair underneath, from having to be without enclosure.

Caps like beanies and ball-caps are for practical use, such as shielding from the sun, hiding bad hair days, and protecting from those cold winds—sensible caps sold in stores from Nordstrom to Walgreen’s, plastered with logos or simply a solid color. But caps can also be used for comfort, for hiding. I’ve known men to wear caps daily, every waking minute, either because their hair is thinning or nonexistent or because a cap keeps it all covered. Caps hold something inside—insecurity, perhaps—in an intimate relationship with the heads they cover. But hats are different creatures altogether. Hats like the fedora are purposeful—not shading or casually concealing what’s below. They make themselves known.

And caps mat down my thick, strawberry blonde hair, plastering bangs to my forehead, so now I can’t wear them. But a fedora, a fedora is structured, fitted but not snug, with a brim. The *Oxford English Dictionary* poetically defines a fedora as “a low soft felt hat with a curled brim and the crown creased lengthwise.” Make it burgundy, and it’s suddenly feminine. Put a little loop in the ribbon, and it’s instantly finished. Put it on clearance, and it just might be mine.

\* \* \*

In the storage room of my parents' basement is a houndstooth hat—not quite a fedora—with a neon-yellow feather in its brim. For years, it hung on a knob by the door so that every time you passed, you brushed a little dust from its face with your hip. It is a strange hat, too odd, I thought, for any man to wear in public. Slightly crumpled, it is caved in where the so-called structure seems to fail it, the brim curled up and in. The middle crease, meant to hold the shape, is exaggerated—either by design or the long pull of gravity—and is more a valley between two high cliffs, a crevice you would find in a glacier. But it once belonged to my father, a souvenir from Disneyland in 1960 where he went by train with his grandparents at the age of nine. He already had Mickey Mouse ears from a previous trip there with his parents and felt that he needed a grown-up hat, and houndstooth, he claims, was the current fad. His grandfather bought it for him, and he wore it all around the park that day—on rides, while eating, and then while napping in the car on the way back to his aunt's house, where they were staying. But, for him, what was popular in Disneyland didn't translate to Kansas, or comfort among men dressed as Disney characters didn't equal the natural spunk of this nine-year-old. He never wore it again, not even around the house, he says. It was a souvenir of a time when he was someone else, a child in a fantasy land, able to accessorize to impress everyone and no one. But in Hutchinson, Kansas, there was no fantasy, just the reality of school and church and polo shirts tucked in. In Kansas, you should not stand out. In Kansas, you can be seen from every hill.

I wore his hat in sixth grade during a production when I had to dress up like a clown. I wore my father's old Chucks, his 70's polyester plaid pants, my hair in pig-tails, and the hat, clownish in its comedic feather and pattern. I was a clown in that hat and those pants, proud in patterns for one afternoon and one evening of performance. We had a photo shoot beforehand,

where my mother took pictures of me in clown poses around the house—mostly dumb, quizzical poses as if to suggest clowns were clueless. At least my character was.

The fedora got its name from the 1882 drama of that name by the Frenchman Victorien Sardou. The heroine of the play is Princess Fedora Romazov, a beautiful Russian who becomes involved, not surprisingly, in a melodramatic love affair. According to Barrymore Laurence Scherer, an opera critic, “Sardou wrote for an audience that relished flamboyant entertainment, grandiose theatrics, powerful rhetoric for its own sake.”<sup>20</sup> I have yet to locate a copy in English, but from what I have read about Sardou and Fedora and the play, it was a natural to be turned into an opera, an opportunity for more splendor.

So if the play/opera *Fedora* is a display of extravagance, of show and flash, how did it come to be the name of a man’s quite formal hat? The original Fedora was performed by “a notorious cross-dresser,” and she wore “a center-creased, soft-brimmed hat” during the play.<sup>21</sup> and women’s-rights activists soon adopted the fashion. The fedora then appeared commercially for the first time in the 1895 Montgomery Ward catalog, and by that time had taken on a different tone: “For ease, comfort and style, the soft Fedora hats lead all others,” the catalog claimed.<sup>22</sup> Following the timeline of the fedora, then, takes it from the crown of a cross-dressing actress, to feminists, to Britain’s Prince Edward VIII, who made the fedora fashionable for men in 1924, to, well, me in 2009.

In the mirror at Target, the fedora complemented my natural flushed tones and seemed to suit my round face. My bangs peeked out and truly looked like fringe. Somehow, my blue eyes were brighter against the burgundy. I put my hands in my pockets and thought I appeared thinner. It looked like me but in a perspective-changing way. It’s like when you look in the

mirror in your new dress, skinny jeans, or dangling necklace, and it reveals another piece of your personality. The change of a certain fit, a common accessory, or a new length can mean the difference between the comfortable familiarity of the *you* you know and the alteration of the *you* you haven't discovered yet. Call it cross-dressing, if you like, or just plain trying on a new "I's."

I lived in T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers in my teen years. My friends teased me when I got excited about the possibility of a free T-shirt just for participating in band or getting good grades or the school's basketball team winning the state championship. The smalls were always a size too big, and, for some reason, hard to come by. I wore them anyway: sleeves skirting elbows, the hem accordianed with constant attention, breezes billowing the back. I didn't wear v-neck sweaters, not even with a slight dip, because I felt too exposed. Nor did I wear fitted shirts for fear of wrong curves.

Consider that girl, scared of her own skin and bones, comfortable in looseness.

In middle school I often sneaked into my parents' room after my father had gone to work in the morning. The full-sized closet was his, packed side to side with polos, T-shirts, button-ups, slacks. My mother's clothes had been forced out long ago into the hall closet, the one meant for photo albums and back-up blankets, because my father kept every article of clothing he had bought since the seventies, whether it had the potential to fit again or not. Many of the shoulders were dusty, slumping, and I remember counting the number of shirts with the tags still attached, numbering, I think, in the teens. Shirts, from paisley polyester to college tees, hung like decades from wire hangers, most of them unmoved except for the occasional shift to make room for a new blue shirt promoting another Hutchinson High School winning football season. When my father wasn't wearing his work clothes, ink-stained jeans and pocket tees, he would wear the same shirt for days. Popular shirts were the gray one he got from his coworkers when he turned

forty (“I’m not forty. I’m 18 with 22 years of experience”), the red, heavy cotton T-shirt with “Polk,” the printing company he worked for, embroidered on the breast, and a polo shirt striped with horizontal blue and red.

My father is a small, balding man who claims he’s five-foot-six but couldn’t possibly be six inches taller than I am. I think he’s more like five-four, and now he’s probably shrinking. So even in seventh grade, my legs were almost the length of his, and, on some whim, I searched his drawer and closet for old jeans. What I found I claimed and wore until my hips grew too wide for their waist: bellbottoms. Original bellbottoms that my father wore in his twenties, before he met my mother, when he had a mustache and shoulder-length, thick, black hair. They were mid-rise and medium-wash and went with everything. They fit my flair at the time, and I wore them with clogs. I wore them with the T-shirts I stole from his closet in the morning before school—the older ones with a slimmer fit or thinner cotton—but still too large for a thirteen-year-old. I permanently stole the “Polk” one so that I would have to explain what it meant to my friends: “It’s where my dad works. He prints books there.” The shirts smelled like his closet, a mixture of dust, rubber, and ink, a scent so *him*, an accumulation of neglect and history.

I didn’t pretend to be him or any man when I wore his old clothes, and it wasn’t obvious to my friends that their origin was another decade or closet. I felt somehow more defined and unique in his clothes—but still conservative. When my father got home from work in the evenings, I couldn’t wait to hear his comment on my ensemble from his closet:

“That one, again?”

Or “You can’t wear that one. I’m saving it.”

Or “What do you want to wear that for?”

Or just a smirk and slight grunt of amusement and bewilderment at his daughter and her

need to capture him. I think I wore them because they felt like wearing home.

\* \* \*

I bought the fedora and wore it on the car-ride home. Jedsen laughed at how “cute” I looked, and I said I thought I had found my style at last: skinny jeans, flats, fitted tops, and an accessory like this hat. In the dark car with Jedsen, I felt relaxed and assured of myself, proud that I had bought something I had once considered out of my comfort zone.

But I put it in the closet when I got home and didn’t plan for the first time I’d wear it publically. To be honest, I imagined myself donning it on Michigan Avenue in Chicago on a chilled day. In my vision, I wore a belted grey peacoat and dark jeans with flats. And my bag was sand, to complement the burgundy. *I was going someplace. I knew exactly where.*

So the fedora sat on a dresser in the closet, and I forgot about it except for the times when I reached for a sock or laid a shirt-in-waiting over it. It wasn’t until a week later when dressing for an outing in Downtown Lawrence that Jedsen suggested I wear the hat. At that moment, I reverted back to shyness and the norm. I eyed the hat in the closet and feared wearing it, feared identification as one who wears accessories for the pleasure of it because, after all, the hat had no use beyond looks. I shook my head. To wear it now would be *wrong*, even though I couldn’t think of a right—other than the Chicago fantasy. That’s what I had bought for three dollars and change: a fantasy in the form of a fedora. I, evidently, didn’t really see that other person in the mirror—just a vision of something that *could* be, maybe, sometime.

“Not tonight. I don’t really feel like wearing it tonight,” I tried to explain to Jedsen and excuse myself from wearing it.

“Oh, come on,” he smirked, as usual, when he considered my response ridiculous. “When were you going to wear it?”

“I don’t know, just not tonight.”

“Kari, it’s a hat. Who cares? Then just wear it in the car and then you can take it off.”

“But my hair—it’ll get all frizzy, and then I won’t be able to take it off.”

“Then don’t.”

I put it on in front of the mirror, and he straightened it so that the point aligned with my nose. It felt crooked when it was straight, but I attributed that to my misshapen head or unbalanced mass of hair rather than to the quality of the Target fedora. It felt *off* at home, among my things, in my own mirror.

In my online search for the fedora, for its origins, I found a Nigerian news website, *Vanguard*, with an article titled “Rules for Wearing a Fedora.” Jemi Ekunkunbor, the writer, cautions wearers of the fedora to coordinate it with your outfit. “Without a good knowledge as to how to wear it, the fedora can effortlessly send your outfit off key,” she states.<sup>23</sup> I can’t help but marvel at the power given to this accessory, as if it had its own personality that would slander your name if you wore it slant. Of course, there are rules for any plumage you wear and seasons for certain colors and materials. What would fashion commentators do during awards season without rules to refer to when critiquing gowns, diamonds, and hairstyles?

What outfit do you wear with a burgundy fedora? Ekunkunbor has an answer for that, too. Apparently, I “need to pair the fedora with soft lines from the neck down to create a real image.” A *real* image. “Envision classy and simple,” she adds.<sup>24</sup> I can’t help but return to my vision of Chicago: do a peacoat and skinny jeans count? Specifically for women, she says, “Fiddle with the position of the brim to decide which looks best for you. You can achieve casual and mystery by the placement of the hat. The choice is up to you.”<sup>25</sup>

I wore the fedora that night on our walk Downtown, the sun slowly setting, and I was fully aware of its presence on my head, the way the hat set on my hair and kept it covering my ears. I put my hands in the pockets of my coat and walked with my head tilted down as I usually do. It was windy, too, which slightly lifted the front brim of the hat when I looked up at Jedsen or the crosswalk. The sidewalks were crowded on that Friday, still early for drinking, but doors opened every few storefronts into grills and boutiques. From a lower angle, I reasonably observed the heads of others, and most were bare other than several wearing skull caps on the cool January evening. I, again, felt wrong, lost under something that didn't hold me in but stuck out like horns or blue furry earmuffs or another personality silently smearing me down, no matter how many times Jedsen told me it *suit*ed me.

I had worn men's clothes, my *father's* clothes, not my mother's heels (she didn't own any). I had dressed myself in comfort, loose shirts and pants that pulled away. I had fallen in love with beanies and the way they fit around my ears and made my forehead sweat. I was still a Kansan, or at least a Jackson, stuck in rules and expectations and ease. I was my father, home from Disneyland and rationalizing that houndstooth didn't match my black-and-white outfit. The sound of the word—fedora, fedora, fedora—echoed error, error, error, adore.

Jedsen and I went into a store, a hip store, Downtown so he could find a skinny tie. It was likely that if anyone was going to be wearing a hat other than a practical one for the cold they were going to be either working or shopping in here among urban/classy/quirky clothes and such. No one was, and I don't think they were selling any, but my eyes turned up. I wore the hat, showed my face: the purposeful combination of blue eyes and burgundy. It was a matter of environment after all—confidence in the right setting for the fedora. The hat belonged, and so I

belonged, even though it would be wrong of me to say I fit the “hip” image the store sold. I kept my hands in coat pockets, thinning me, and browsed the clothes I could not afford. Inside this other store where one could try on different selves of clothing, it felt safe for me to take off my self-made label and just *be* there, there in my fedora, of all things.

Allowing myself to be seen allowed others to see me, something my father never did. Long ago, he cut his hair short, hung up his plaid, and hid all playful or purposeful accessories in the basement. He began hating amusement parks and train rides and disco music. He will never wear houndstooth or paisley polyester or white hightop Converse again. He will never live anywhere other than Hutchinson, if not literally then mentally, pushed down by convention and tradition and, yes, fear of judgment. The opera critic Scherer further said of Sardou that his “tragic characters are repeatedly torn between two courses of action, their decision leading to a still more critical choice: life or death.”<sup>26</sup> Princess Fedora chose death, self-poisoning, as did my father in practice.

Yet, over the years, my clothes have gotten fitter, more embracing of curves and revealing of the upper chest. I can’t imagine thumbing through my father’s closet today and pulling out anything other than perhaps another “Polk” T-shirt—but only to work out in. His shirts don’t create “soft lines” on my body, and they don’t match my fedora. The scent of ink and dust is taking on the label “musk.” In his closet, past lives live next to the present, evidence of former potential. They serve as reminders of the choices we all have to make in particular courses of action, whether it be wearing hats, donating old clothes, or hugging our daughters.

I wore the fedora out that night, through shops and a restaurant. Two people stopped to tell me, “I really like your hat,” and, later, a woman stopped me at a grocery store as Jedsen and I

entered.

“I love your fedora. It looks marvelous on you.” The woman, appearing to be in her fifties, was on her way out of the store, cart filled with bags, and physically turned her head to follow me as I passed her.

I blushed and shrugged, “Thank you.”

“Can I ask you where you got it?” She took a few steps toward me, away from the exit.

“I actually got it at Target,” I replied, looking up at Jedsen for reassurance, leaving out the part about it being on clearance.

“Well, it looks great.” And she winked and left with her cart. Jedsen was so thrilled with himself—that he had gotten some eager affirmations to his original praise of the hat on my head—that he laughed and shook my shoulders.

“See? I told you. It suits you.” Maybe it did. Maybe it does.

## Flight

Craig and Janis don't drink. Except on special occasions like anniversaries or Saturday nights when they decide to splurge on a strawberry margarita at a restaurant. Janis blushes when she orders the strawberry margarita and a Dr. Pepper. She pats Craig's ink-stained hand as it shakes against the water glass. When Janis takes a sip of margarita, she giggles. She doesn't stop giggling. She thinks she's fresh from the first drink. Her children tell her she's smiling, and she giggles. Her children say, "We should go walk down by Cow Creek after dinner," and she giggles. She touches her husband's thigh, high up, fingers walking inward. She says he should touch her leg. He doesn't.

Janis offers her children sips of her margarita, and they drink gladly. They take long swigs through the straw. It tastes good. Her daughter acts tipsy, happy. The margarita, its salt on her lips and index finger, has made her happy. They all drink it down, the strawberry—always strawberry, so they don't taste the alcohol. They are all tipsy, they think. Her children do not know alcohol. There is no beer at family gatherings, no liquor, no whiskey. Her children do not know the difference between supermarket beer and liquor-store beer.

Janis walks. She walks straight after a margarita, alone on the sidewalk along Cow Creek as she trails her children. Her thighs are tight from all of the walking, and the steep incline that her children climb to the street comes easy for her. She walks around in a white tee-shirt at night, in the morning, her panties showing. Her children see her muscles. She is strong on the bottom. She does not tumble. Her walk is not faltering.

## Taking Names

He took our names. We stacked our attendance cards on the end of the pew, face up, with names writ large and “Member” checked with a blue X. Our names, our addresses, written each Sunday service so that we counted, added to the total that would be printed in the next week’s bulletin. My name always came first on the card because I put it there and because there were rarely any “Members of Family” sitting beside me to list below. Sometimes I wrote my full name to take up the whole line; other times I simplified it to K. Jackson because the secretary would know who I was. Sometimes I added to my name, put hearts around it, or hyphenated my last name to end with that of my crush: Jackson-Hollingsworth or Jackson-Lammert. They counted any version of my name I wrote.

One Sunday a month in high school, I gathered the names and collected the offering with the Youth Group. Picking up the stacked attendance cards was easy, but the offering took coordination. If I passed the plate from the left down a row, I had to make sure the usher on the right was there to take it. The red velvet plates zigzagged the rows of pews and filled with envelopes, bills, coins, and small drawings on the “Scribbles” cards. When we made it to the back, in the Narthex just outside the sanctuary, we dumped our plates into two large gold bowls so that the congregation could hear the clatter through the offering hymn. We tossed our stack of names on the money, and two of us carried the bowls down the center aisle to the altar in song, delivering the attendance cards to the pastor so he could deliver them to God. After leaving the bowls at the altar, we walked back the side aisles with empty arms.

I slipped my hand between bodies to reach the table. From my survey of the exhibition

table, I knew the business cards were near the ledge by the box with prize entries, so I planned my reach between two women chatting with the man in uniform about their stained carpets. I looked away from the women's round stomachs as I stretched, and appraised the packed exhibition hall. The booth selling soap and honey two tables down looked promising for another business card, as did the Barton County Community College booth across from me. When I felt the raised letters and stiff paper that I needed, I pinched one and drew it back. "Excuse me," I mumbled to the women, but they took no notice and asked the man about removing wine stains from white shag.

I went from table to table to collect, slipping in inconspicuously when I could so that the person behind the booth would not get curious about a thirteen-year-old girl taking cards for kitchen designers, university advisors, and knife-sellers. My mother was always in sight, though distant, to allow me to do my work in solitude, and when I had comfortably exhausted the hall of its business cards, I tugged on my mother's shirt to move on to the next building.

Every year at the Kansas State Fair, I built up my collection by dozens: Raymond E. Yutzky of Reno Fabricating and Sales Co., John Oscarson of KDesigners, Douglas M. Mason of Options Educational Counseling, Kaye Baker of Ceramics by K, Michael P. Holland of ServiceMaster. They added to the cards I took from businesses and fast-food restaurants, the cards I requested of my family members and friends, both in and outside of Hutchinson. I had cards from Kansas to California to Kentucky, even though I had barely left the borders of the state in my young life.

I alphabetized the business cards by title or company and filed them into a green see-through container with a hinged lid. Taller pieces of white cardstock, scalloped on the top edge and lined with varied colors of marker, and labeled with a letter of the alphabet, stuck out above

the cards as dividers. When I brought home a new card, I pulled out the letter to which it belonged and sorted the cards until I came upon the alphabetical spot for the particular person. Each name had a place, and they were in order, all of them.

Over a decade later, I spread out a handful of my collection on my desk. Before me was the cluttered collection of a young teenager. After years of telling people (when I remembered) that I used to collect business cards, and years after the container moved to the basement, it was back in my hands, so familiar and strange. I thought the container had been tossed by my mother or even myself long ago, a silly hobby not worth keeping, but when I called my mother a few months ago to ask her if she remembered me making my own business card, she said, “No, but your collection is still downstairs.”

“Really? You kept them?”

“You were a funny girl. I couldn’t throw them away. They’re a part of you,” she explained. And so they were, but I didn’t realize that until I began going through them.

How did I begin to collect names, those cards in holders on desks and counters? I wish I could trace back to my first card, the first impulse. Did I see one that was pretty? Or did I see it as free, available, and just want to take it because I could, a remembrance of my childhood thievery? At what point did a small pile of cards turn into a collection, an obsession that would drive me to seek business cards from Los Angeles where my great aunt Jackie lived, as well as business cards from Carbondale, Illinois, where my could-be penpal-boyfriend Jonathan Carlton lived? How did those conversations go? “Oh, by the way, whenever you’re out, could you pick up business cards for me and send them? Twenty business cards can be sent with one stamp. Thank you.”

It became a collection of colors, of mostly standard size but for the few that stuck out. I

had cards from emu and ostrich farms (a surprising number, actually), gift stores, truck stops, and two cards for Navy recruiters in Hutchinson and for one in Illinois, care of Jonathan. I never considered joining the Navy, though I wonder now what became of Jonathan, the boy who visited my great grandmother with his aunt that summer of 1996. We had kept up the writing for a while afterward, and he had asked me to be his girlfriend in a letter. I said no. Because of the distance.

As I looked through the cards, I remembered some of their faces, the colors or graphics, the forgotten stores of Hutchinson, once so memorable on our walks across town. Pet Express, Gai Marché, Headturner's Salon. The neon-orange Paddleduck's card, a secondhand children's clothing store that I never went to but remembered because of its card's unbelievable color and the way it cast an orange glow on the surrounding cards.

I was surprised to find cards from family members and learn their job titles from the mid-nineties. Bruce L. Jackson, Supervisor, Maintenance Operations for the United States Postal Service in Kansas City, Kansas. Lynne K. Lowe, Administrative Secretary in the Instructional Resource Center at the College of the Canyons in Santa Clarita, California. Joyce E. Lentz, Mortgage Loan Officer and Branch Manager of Central Bank and Trust in Hutchinson. Since then, Bruce's USPS branch has closed, and he is in limbo at another office. Joyce left Hutchinson, and now I don't know what she does in Boise, Idaho.

Along with my families' cards are those from hotels we once stayed at, a La Quinta in Lenexa and an Astromotel ("The Space Age Motel") in Dodge City. There are cards for my dentist, penpals, presidents of banks, and Pegues Place, "The Store for Men," in Downtown Hutchinson, where my grandmother worked on the second floor in the children's department for sixteen years. There is a card, dandelion yellow, for Décor, the store that I once stole from and

that later exploded due to a natural-gas leak. And there are two from R.L. Polk & Co. where my father worked as a printer for thirty-three years until the plant closed, one for Jim E. Trezise Sr., the Plant Engineer, and another for my father's supervisor, Mel Valentine. My father never had a business card.

And then there's *my* business card, the one I made on a machine in the mall when I was thirteen and finally had a reason to make a one. I had just taken the babysitting certification course through the YMCA and was ready to build a list of clients. I labored over the simple choices as I stood on tiptoe over the machine, and settled on vertical orientation so I could spell BABYSITTING vertically along a partial border on the left side. At the top, my name, and underneath, "Child Care." I finished up with my telephone number and address. Now, I can see that the design is poor, with too much white space near the bottom and not enough at the top. It is on standard white cardstock, with black print. The font looks to be Georgia. I pinned my card on bulletin boards at church where most parents knew me from choir and musicals. No one ever called, thank goodness, because I turned out to be a terrible babysitter.

My name is cold, a verb. It *does*. I hated my name when I was younger. I wanted to be Kara, something that made sense as a name. She was my pediatrician's daughter, a dancer: Kara Davis. Then I wanted to be Whitney, and I was for a week in second grade when we got to change our names; I wrote it on my assignments and homework. When I went home I was Kari, but at the table with my classmates and teacher, they called me Whitney. Whitney was a cool name, and then I lost it. In seventh-grade foreign-language class, we chose French names from a list separated between boy and girl names: I was Sophie.

Teachers facilitated this desire to change our identities, leaning down from authority to

give us permission to take on a new name and reinvent ourselves if only for a week or half of a semester. And then, if you were a young teenager anything like me, you went home and flipped through teen magazines like *Bop*, *Teen Beat*, and *All About You* with a pen in hand. Once you got past the articles about the latest teen star's favorite cereal and the fold-out poster inserts of dreamy actors that you immediately surgically removed and taped to your wall, you took the quizzes. "Which Spice Girl are You?" "How Flirtatious are You?" "Are you HOT or PRETTY?" "What Kind of Friend are You?" *Who are you?* they asked. *Who are you?* the faceless adult editors prompted from the multiple-choice questions, knowing full well you had no idea and were relying on their assessment of your trustworthiness, pretty-factor, jealousy, and comparison to pop stars' styles to come to some steadier conclusion. Either the answer was obvious (I knew I didn't flirt, so the conclusion was foregone) or ridiculous (You're Sporty Spice because you just happened to give one more tough-girl answer than the others). Nevertheless, the quiz decided what or who you were, and you carried that with you in your conversations and interactions with friends in the hallways at school. Month by month, you accumulated quiz results and formed a ragged identity. With each quiz, you adjusted your definition of yourself. And when you had to say who you were, you lied.

One of my friends in college couldn't decide if she was Christian, Muslim, or agnostic. It changed on a monthly basis, and she formed her friendships and social life around her current religion. She stopped eating pork in October, and then by December she was eating a B.L.T. at the tutoring desk where we both worked in the library. It was exhausting to witness her fluctuations, her constant reassessment of identity through religion.

At the time, I was actively involved with my church, First United Methodist, where I had

grown up. My understanding of myself was tied to my place in the church, as a member of the Educational Ministries Committee and Church Council, and the only regularly attending college student in the college Sunday School class. Afraid to let go of my friends in the youth group, though I had surpassed the age limit, I stayed on as a “sponsor,” my excuse to remain connected to the community. But then I left for a university, and the committees and groups next to my name fell away to reveal a girl just as confused as my friend Jenn.

She ultimately decided on Islam when she met a Muslim man and married him two weeks after they met. Jenn changed her name to Halimah and now wears a scarf over her ears, hair, neck, and chest. The last time I saw her, she tugged at her scarf around her ears in the June heat and spoke of *salaat*.

I had kept bulletins from the services I had been a part of in high school, my name tied by ellipses to “Prayer Leader” or “Children’s Time,” and when I came across them while packing to move three years ago, I tossed them in the recycle bin with old assignments and fliers. I haven’t seen the sanctuary’s teal carpet and pews or its thirty-foot cross in four years, though I receive a newsletter by email every month.

The church still has my name.

Many of the business cards I collected had raised lettering, created through a process called thermography. A conveyor connects the sections of a thermography machine. The first section covers a sheet of paper with powdered polymer, and then a vacuum removes the powder from all areas except the wet inks—inks without the dryers or hardeners—so that, when the sheet is radiated in an oven of nine-hundred to thirteen-hundred degrees for about three seconds and then, prior to combustion, cooled through convection, it creates raised images, raised letters,

raised print. Through a process of application and removal, heating and cooling, filming and hardening, the name takes on physicality. As with Braille, you can run your finger over it and feel the texture of a name. You can read who you are at your fingertips.

## Slumber

It snowed, a blizzard, on my thirteenth birthday, in the middle of April. Icy sheets of wind and flakes pelted my face every time I opened the door for a friend, four total, for my first slumber party. Great-Grandma Jackson, our host, bellowed hello from her kitchen where she was popping popcorn on the stove.

She left us to our amusement and watched from the dining-room as we paraded through the house in her costume jewelry. As girls do, we played Truth or Dare and tied our long hair in ponytails on the tops of our heads. After a series of pyramid photo shoots, one girl's knees set wobbly on the back of another, with Elmo or teddy bear in joyful hand, we settled in my great-grandfather's former bedroom past midnight. Now chilled from the sweat of laughter and gossip, we collapsed in sleeping bags on the floor and queen bed, headboardless and covered in a piled blue thermal blanket. None of us slept under its covers but on top, using it as a raised floor.

“Lights out!” I used my last energy to announce the coming darkness.

Near to the door, to the right of the bed, I flipped down the switch to turn off the overhead light, but nothing happened. I tried it again, but it didn't work, so I left it down. I tried the switch on the other side of the room, and snap, the room went dark save for the neighbor's porch light, a distant glare through the window and blowing snow.

The room had been uninhabited for only three years, not long enough to erase the scent of my great-grandfather or the memory of his weight on the bed. As a child afraid of what has been lost, I feared my great-grandfather's voice through the shadows, his image in a dark corner. I feared his presence in the room with five young girls, tussled and shivering in the strange blank of cold. It had gotten colder as we slept, breath shallow in fetal positions.

I awoke to the woman in the open door, the woman in a slip and bra, peach satin. I looked up at her, ghostly in the raw grey, from the floor and did not move or speak in the grip of fright. She stood there a moment, motionless, and gazed at the far wall, a mirror. The glow of the window showed her skin, an ashy violet streaked with darkened wrinkles. She flipped the switch by the door back up with her left hand and disappeared into the black room behind.

It was the heater, she told us in the morning, stern. Great-Grandpa had control of the heat with that switch by his bed when he was too heavy to walk with ease. We shouldn't have touched it, she said, and set a steaming pan of cinnamon rolls on the table with six plates.

## Forecasting

*A change in the weather is sufficient to recreate the world and ourselves.*

--Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*

When it rained, God's tears streamed down from Heaven. God pounded his fists in anger to create thunder, and lightning sprang forth from the force of the beating. The rainbow after the storm was God's smile, turned upside down. His breath, the wind: "He spoke, and the winds rose, stirring up the waves," reads Psalms 107:25. God could be the answer and cause for every natural phenomenon, I believed, including earthquakes and wind, but I couldn't figure out how he created tornadoes, those beasts that bore down on us in Tornado Alley. The whirlwind didn't associate with anything a human-like God could do, unless he spun in circles until he stirred up the wind, like you can do with friends in a round pool. But, then, he would get too dizzy.

I, of course, learned the scientific causes of rain, thunder, lightning, earthquakes, and tornadoes in school, but they have never lost their celestial wonder. The weather spooks you here in Kansas, and sets you on a search for the origin of clouds. On nights when storms creep up from the south and you're in the middle of darkness on a highway, the radio won't tell you what's coming until it's there. You look out into the fields on all sides and wonder what's falling, and how, and where. Out of the darkness rotates a faded, white beam. From a spot on the ground, it stretches into the sky and disappears into clouds like it's part of them. It moves, seems to spin toward you as you drive by, and you don't realize until you've past that it's a search light and not a tornado. The sky can fool you.

Anyone living in Kansas will tell you how the weather changes within minutes. There's even the saying for those unhappy with the current conditions: "If you don't like the weather, wait twenty minutes." A cold front can come in one burst. A pleasant fall day can turn like it did

a day in October last year. The leaves galloped, their burnt blades hurdled up the hill in the wind I didn't know existed. I was not prepared—bare arms—for the sudden grey veil, the moon still in the paling blue of afternoon. What was autumn heaved southeast in minutes. In blew the kind of Kansas cold front that hurls whispers somewhere beyond the ears. And this, this is when the only answer seems to sit, legs extended, and let leaves claim what they can.

I danced to music in the near-empty living room. By dancing I mean pumping my arms in the air at high moments in the songs and rocking my hips over set feet. Dancing occurs more with my arms and mind than with physical space, but the open room allowed it for once, this eager flailing.

My furniture had been taken away earlier that May afternoon by friends in need of filling their new space, and they had loaded up the mismatched pieces of a student's apartment into the back of a pickup. That loveseat and armchair set, striped, with padding so plump but structureless that you felt the springs if you sat down too heavily. The loveseat was no good for lounging or sleeping when sick—even my five-foot length outstretched its means. The coffee table, a nearly solid fifty-two by eighteen inches, had been found at a thrift store by my mother, who had bought it for twenty dollars. “It's almost like your grandparents' coffee table,” she had told me over the phone, and I had cringed but said “Thank you.” When it arrived on moving day, I sighed at its heft and had to maneuver every living room arrangement around it for three years because I had neither any way to get it out of my apartment nor any desire to go completely without a coffee table. The last major piece, the computer desk, had been a clearance find right before I had moved out of my parents' home. It was a tower, a six-and-a-half-foot modern industrial tower with fake wood and fake metal that I had thought was cool and would match my

new silver desktop computer.

But now all that was gone, and it was a relief to see the floor—dark, outdoor carpet that it was—and be able to lie down, stretched out and spread out. For that afternoon, I threw the bouncing mouse from one end of the apartment to the other for my cat to chase, unobstructed. She rolled it and flipped over from corner to corner and didn't have to stop for a chair leg but to catch her breath. That afternoon, able to feel space again and see the baseboards, I felt that I could have been all right without furniture at all, that pillows could become my cushion and be tossed aside when not in use. For one small block of time, I experienced living without blockage in the small apartment. The removal of furniture marked more than a shedding of hand-me-downs and undergraduate transition: it was the renewal of appreciation for the lack of things. Not every corner must be filled. Shelves can go empty. The walls will stand bare. Stuff is not the answer to depression by environment. There, in the near empty, with the music I had learned to turn to in troubled times, I hated my apartment less.

New furniture was being delivered in the morning, a premature replacement prior to my moving to a new apartment in a month and a half. By the time I had settled into the bare floor, both Snickers and I resting from the romping, the sky was turning darker outside my north window, and the thunder headed in. The lone standing furniture in the living room—the only things not being replaced—were the television and its stand, old and unimportant in their appearance. They sat low under the high window and served as a perch for Snickers to look out onto the trees beyond the ledge of the patio, her tail swaying against the screen, chin raised to sniff at the humidity.

I walked out to the patio and felt the green pre-storm breeze. The day had been hot for mid-May, a sweltering brush of the summer ahead, and I pressed a finger into the thirsty soil of

the potted hostas on the outer ledge. Resting my elbows on the railing to lean out beyond the building, I scanned the sky for traces of blue. Above, the clouds gathered and collided, not choosing any direction but all being guided northeast by a noisy line. It was a study of grays as the shades sang in and through one another. The morning forecast had warned of a chance of thunderstorms, and in they tumbled, bound to get across the state by nightfall. As the first drops began to darken the pavement below, I stepped inside to turn on the local station for the weather, excited to watch the storm come in on the radar and hear of its severity.

But the only thing severe on the screen when I turned it on was snow. No, not that fluffy white crunchy stuff that covers our lives in winter but the kind of black and white rumbling of pixilated fuzz. No signal, no cable, no visual, no sound. Just snow.

As a child in Hutchinson, our broadcast news came out of Wichita, forty-five minutes southeast, and my family would flip between the networks during storms to find the one saying our city's name. But for everyday weather, we turned to the CBS affiliate, with anchors Cindy Klose and Hutchinson-native Roger Cornish, and meteorologist Merrill Teller. We called them by their first names and asked for their autographs when they broadcast from the Kansas State Fair every year, sidling up to their outpost with glossy black-and-whites and sharpies.

Upon moving to northeast Kansas, a different viewing area, I had to seek out a trustworthy station to replace KWCH and begin a new nightly tradition. It didn't take long to discover a Topeka station that matched my personality: positive stories, perky anchors, upbeat theme music, and honest, playful weather. Now, I watch the morning news, the five and six o'clock news, and usually the ten o'clock news. I know when a road has closed in Topeka and for how long, how many people were airlifted from the accident on I-470, and the almanac high

temperature for the day. I know the meteorologist's children's names.

When, about a year before this empty afternoon of approaching storms, the trusted chief meteorologist at the Topeka station had left for a job as a spokesman for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and was replaced by a new guy from the South, I resented his unfamiliarity with the region. I didn't trust him with the weather at first. This outsider: would he fit in? Would he learn that weather here is defined by its proximity to and cardinal direction from I-70? Would he know to give the game-time forecast for the local university football teams?

It took a few months, but Jeremy Kappel gained my nightly trust. In fact, I developed a crush on him much like I had on the meteorologists of my youth. Ah, Ben Pringle. Oh, Merrill Teller. Not because they were handsome and young, actors chosen to play a part as meteorologists had been a few decades ago, but because they had power over the weather, in my eyes. These men, family men in their forties or fifties, came on every evening to tell me what to wear the next day and advise me on whether or not I should leave my window open all night. In their suits and ties, never green, they pointed to my city, said its name, and pronounced the day's high temperatures with authority.

"Get out your mittens and caps for the walk to school tomorrow, kids. It's going to be a chilly one," Merrill Teller would say as we ate dinner. I would listen and demand to know where my striped gloves had gone to.

The local meteorologist often gets the lead of the newscast for a "first look" at the weather. The anchors say, unless there is a *breaking* story, "Good evening. Before we get to our top story, here's chief meteorologist Merrill Teller for a first look at your weather," because the weather frames the broadcast, serving as both the preface, the climax, and the epilogue. And

then, if it's an average weather day, we get the current temperatures around the area and possibly the high of the day before he turns it back to the news desk with a tease for the main weather segment: "Will tomorrow be beautiful like today, or will those rain clouds move in? Coming up, I'll have the answer." And just like that, I'm hooked. I have to know about tomorrow.

We wait through eleven minutes of shootings, local politicians, and commercials for the answer to the tease: "Looks like tomorrow is going to be a few degrees cooler, but that sun isn't going anywhere, folks." Because the weather is one thing we all share and have some stake in, it's how the local stations gain and maintain your attention.

And then it's the highs, the lows, the barometric pressure and wind speed, the precipitation count for the month, the front moving in or out, the regional radar, the local radar, the color-coded map of average temperatures, the specific twelve-hour, forty-eight-hour, and seventy-two-hour forecasts, and then the almighty seven-day, or, if you're lucky, ten-day forecast. We want to know what it's going to be like next Saturday when this Saturday is still two days away. What does the future hold? The local meteorologist is the closest thing we have to a fortune teller. He predicts, based on patterns, the trajectory of storms, the direction of wind, the percentage chance of rain. But, though this process is hidden from us, he's actually looking into the past to identify what has come before. He learns, remembers, and adapts in order to forecast because the future is constantly changing.

No meteorologist has a perfect record in forecasting, but you'll often hear rants from your neighbors about wrong predictions for snowfall totals. We expect accuracy in the forecast, just as we expect our stocks to rise steadily until our retirement. Some meteorologists even have a target feature, or some game that they play with themselves and the public to gauge how accurate the forecast turned out to be. A profession of the knowledge of the future creates higher—the

highest—expectations, yet the trusted meteorologist has no choice but to promote his relative accuracy. It's getting better—the three-day outlook is generally reliable, but the five-day and especially the ten-day forecasts are little more than slightly educated guesses. And the meteorologist is blamed for failed forecasts, but backstage he's comparing weather models, averaging scenarios into a spaghetti plot to predict if your football game will get drizzles or sleet tomorrow afternoon. It's half science half practice. It's knowledge of the region's weather patterns and hope for a similar scenario.

We get one more check of the weather at the end of the newscast, sending us away squarely with our knowledge of the current temperature and how far it will fall how soon. We have our knowledge of tomorrow and go back to eating our meatloaf.

When I was nine, I began repeating the Lord's Prayer whenever it thundered, close, in the night. I feared the lightning that could fix down on me—strike through a window, I thought. I kept up the praying until the thunder was more subdued, down to a growl, and the lightning was a mere flash of distant headlights through the blinds.

Over the next few years, I learned to expect the crashes and would only clutch at the silver cross around my neck for comfort if it was too loud to let me sleep. I accepted the storms as signs of life, of movement. I began to crave storms, to cheer when "severe" storms were forecast over "slight." Bring it all, rain and booms. Splinter the elm in the front yard down its side, leaving gaping flesh. Put on the light show. I'll watch from the window. I'll watch from the porch. Downpour on the highway; lightning, surround. I'll catch hail in my hand.

Now I sleep with the window open during a storm to feel the full effect. I have let the cross go. It lies tangled in a box with a rhinestone anchor on a chain. My finger traces the trail of

a front across the sky until nothing remains of the storm, and then I start over again with the wind.

I adore storm season, hearing the thunder and, hopefully, feeling the shake of the table. Lightning, and its art. The first drops, taps, and the roar of a downpour. Open windows for the sound and smell. The turbulence is comforting. And the weather is on the television, at first the little corner map with its blinking counties and then the continuous coverage, my favorite, with Doppler radar filling the screen, meteorologist too harried to put on his suit jacket, sleeves rolled back for business. I watch the window, the weather, while keeping an eye on the screen.

The storm moves in color across the screen. The stray, blue and green border? Nothing to worry about—just sprinkles or cloud-cover. The solid green means it's raining steadily, and then there are usually masses of yellow before the smaller and more powerful orange and red centers. The smallest color is purple. When there is a purple blob on the radar, it is severe, concentrated. So all these colors glide in changing shapes across the map, straying from one side to another and bending at will.

I watch the storm move over the state, over my former homes, and onto this one, where I am. The colors expand and contract, change direction, and intensify in the warm, severe shades, or fade into blue, nothing, the grey of the map. Storms are alive, and you can see that on the screen. You can watch from a storm's inception four counties over to the red mess blotting out your city. Look outside and witness the mounting wall clouds as you follow them on the screen. A collection of colors, two-dimensional but growing, equals the volume of molecules and energy above. The warning in blinking red on the map flashes in sound and color around you, as the thunder crashes in the wake of light. Notice of wind speed—damaging, they say—echoes in the limb slapping your window through streaks of rain. Feel the thrill of watching the storm move

toward you in a vibrant illustration while looking out at the rain and breathing the colors. Colors signify the doing. What floods your ears, eyes, and patio pots is represented in flat, moving color. The golf-ball-sized hail they just warned you about? Hear it tap slow and then continuous on the deck. The rain, orange, floods your driveway in a matter of minutes. The thunder actually rattles the vase over there and sends a frightened pet under the bed.

Blue restlessness is always there, lurking in front of and behind a system of mess. Nothing starts or stops. It moves in waves from small hints of something to the main event. The blue rim, bent to accommodate what may or may not be there, borders the chaos. Once the storm has passed, once the clouds have divided, the blue remains. Not on the screen for all to see, the sky itself takes over.

Snow. I anticipated my meteorologist Jeremy Kappel, but there was nothing, no colors, no clouds on the screen. I changed the channels, scanning for a temporary weatherman to accompany my storm. One channel had a fuzzy outline of radar and the muffled voice of a weather authority. This station was out of Kansas City, more brash and breaking in both its news and weather, and on the other side of Lawrence and the storm than my trusted Topeka station. The meteorologist, with a chatty, congested voice, was only beginning to be concerned, but outside the tornado sirens turned. And again. Again. Five times in an hour. The colorless movement on the screen showed the tornado-turning possibility moving directly over Lawrence, headed over my apartment.

I have been through countless tornado warnings and only come close to the whirlwind twice, the first when I was five and had chicken pox. My mother was working at the mall, so my father was the one who listened to Merrill Teller's warnings to take cover. From my fevered

resting place on the vinyl loveseat in the living room, my father moved my then-one-year-old brother and me down to the basement, in the unfinished back room, and into the open cement shower littered with pale spiders dead in their webs. The itching was persistent, and I could not stop trying to scratch every part of me at once. I squatted on the cool cement and leaned against the rough wall of the shower. Its texture was harsh enough to outweigh the pain of itching, so I amplified the relief by scraping my back against the wall, up and down, a thousand fingernails working on me at once. The sirens kept on outside as my father fiddled with the portable radio, my brother propped on his knee as he knelt under the lone exposed bulb of the dank room. He turned the knob in degrees, trying for any station, but none would come through. The television was out. The radio was dead. Without the pulse of radar, we were unsettled.

I whined through tears as I looked down at my bare stomach, the wet red bursts, over the dress pulled up to my chest. *Scratch my legs*, I begged my father, but he refused—not necessarily out of the knowledge of the danger of such action but out of distraction with the storm. Where the tornado was, we didn't know. When it would be safe to go back upstairs, we didn't know until the tornado sirens stopped their shrilling for longer than five minutes.

The threat was real then, though we learned that only afterward as my father stepped out into the dark to pick up limbs scattered across the yard and driveway. A large limb blocked part of the street. He called his brother on the other side of town then and learned the tornado had passed about two miles to our west.

But the sirens, because of their frequency for false warnings, usually go ignored, even on my second-floor apartment with no shelter available, nowhere nearby to go for cover. Serious threats occur once in every twenty soundings of the sirens, I learned. It's better to watch from the patio, inside the event, than hide in a windowless room, helpless, until it might be over. The risks

have been worth it: watching the rain slant sideways and collect en masse on the parking lot below, following fingers of lightning from start to finish, feeling the thunder pulse through my toes.

This time, though, with only the sirens as a warning and no picture, no sound of the severity except the muffled names of surrounding counties, I put Snickers' food and water in the bathroom, placed my laptop on the toilet seat with my keys and purse, and threw a bed pillow on the floor to serve as protection if I decided to take the warning as serious as the sirens made it. I dragged Snickers out from under the bed where she had been hiding from the thunder, pushed her into the bathroom and shut her inside.

I continued to watch the screen in frustration from the center of the empty living room, standing with my arms folded in the silence of the ragged static. Though the picture on the screen revealed nothing, I refused to turn it off entirely. The mere knowledge that something was being shown, said, about the storm somewhere within and behind the grays gave me hope that I would know if a tornado had touched down nearby. From time to time, the poor picture improved to reveal the colorless radar of my sky.

I wanted to know what was upon me. The sky itself was a warning, but I needed the answer from the authority for the tandem knowledge of living experience and educated prediction, a reliance I learned in my youth. Above Lawrence, the storm continued to stir, and the crook with the tornado possibility passed over me and out beyond the city boundaries. I never hunkered down in the bathroom. The rain kept on; the clouds jumbled and moved northeast.

As the storm, the heaviest churning, shifted out, the picture on the television cleared. Color returned, and clarity of voice.

I stayed on the Kansas City channel now to track the storm as it steadily moved in that direction, for I didn't want to let the excitement of the afternoon dissipate with the warning. The weatherman believed the tornado warning would not be extended into the next county; the storm had passed over a whole county with no tornado, so they let the warning go. But the colors still morphed on the screen.

Outside, from my patio, I followed the storm as it moved out. Though the rain had stopped, drops fell on my shoulders through the slats in the patio above me, and I shivered in the stillness of air. All I could see was the north side of the storm, now the tail end, and the lightening of the gray. I smiled when I thought of Snickers still shut in the bathroom, probably sitting on my laptop in the dark and howling in the enclosed space. We were safe, on the other side of severity, yet I was grateful for the danger.

In a 1973 letter, E.B. White wrote, "Sailors have an expression about the weather: they say the weather is a great bluffer. I guess the same is true of our human society — things can look dark, then a break shows in the clouds, and all is changed."<sup>27</sup> And as I felt the color of my view lift into a dull glow, I knew my time with the storm had finished.

The weather was loud enough so that I could listen to the alerts through the window and follow it in voice, knowing the storm's location in relation to towns. Not twenty minutes passed, and I heard that a tornado was spiraling down near the turnpike on I-70, just over the county line. The storm was not finished, the prediction was wrong. I went inside to watch the tornado cross the highway, this time live from a helicopter camera. White and thin, the funnel bent. The helicopter passed through, around, clouds and rain, and lost the tornado but found its path afterward: a block's width of debris and torn roofs from one side of the highway to the other. The storm chopper followed the path until it disappeared, where the tornado had lifted. The

setting sun reflected off the wet, broken roofs.

I imagined standing in the path, in the middle of a field. Would the air feel lighter? Is the pressure any less, consumed and absorbed by the recent vortex? If I lie down in the wheat, would I be lifted by the memory of what has passed?

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> G. Douglas Atkins, *Tracing the Essay: Through Experience to Truth* (Athens: University of Georgia Pr, 2005), 92.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Hoagland, "What I Think, What I Am," in *The Art of the Essay*, ed. Lydia Fakundiny (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 691.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Debra Fitzgerald, "Translating Ideas: What Scientists Can Teach Fiction Writers about Metaphor," in *Reader for English 803: Practicum in the Teaching of Creative Writing*, eds. Michael L. Johnson and Tom Lorenz (Lawrence, Kansas: KU Department of English, 2009), 184.

<sup>5</sup> Hoagland, "What I Think, What I Am," 691.

<sup>6</sup> Cynthia Ozick, *Art & Ardor* (New York: Knopf, 1983), xi.

<sup>7</sup> Scott Russell Sanders, *The Paradise of Bombs* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), xv.

<sup>8</sup> Ozick, *Art & Ardor*, xi.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Selzer, "An Absence of Windows," in *The Art of the Essay*, 434.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 431.

<sup>11</sup> Kamilla Denman, "Emily Dickinson's Volcanic Punctuation," in *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 2.1 (1993): 32.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 32-33.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Christian Andersen, "The Princess and the Peas," in *The Classic Fairy Tales*, eds. Iona and Peter Opie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 286.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 286-87.

<sup>16</sup> "Bed," in *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2009, web, 2 June 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Gary Martin, "Go to the Mattresses," in *The Phrase Finder*, web, 2 Feb 2010.

<sup>18</sup> "Mattress," in *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2009, web, 18 May 2009.

<sup>19</sup> William Stafford, "Prairie Town," in *The Darkness Around Me is Deep* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 106.

<sup>20</sup> Barrymore Laurence Scherer, "Passion Flower," in *Opera News*, The Metropolitan Opera Guild, 1997, web, 27 Jan 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Douglas Harper, "Fedora," in *Online Etymology Dictionary*, n.p., n.d., web, 26 Jan 2009.

<sup>22</sup> "Fedora," in *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2009, web, 26 Jan 2009.

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<sup>23</sup> Jemi Ekunkunbor, “Rules for Wearing a Fedora,” in *Vanguard News Online*, Vanguard Media Limited, n.d., web, 28 Jan 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Scherer, “Passion Flower.”

<sup>27</sup> E.B. White, quotation, *Goodreads*, Goodreads Inc, web, 16 Jan 2010.