

ELEMENTS FOR AN ATLAS

By

Copyright 2009
Samantha J. Bell

Ph.D., University of Kansas 2009

Submitted to the Department of English and the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Kansas
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Chairperson G. Douglas Atkins

Michael L. Johnson

Kenneth Irby

Michael Valk

Charles Marsh

Date Defended: October 22, 2009

The Dissertation Committee for Samantha J. Bell certifies
that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

ELEMENTS FOR AN ATLAS

Committee:

Chairperson G. Douglas Atkins

Michael L. Johnson

Kenneth Irby

Michael Valk

Charles Marsh

Date Approved: October 22, 2009

Abstract

This dissertation is a collection of creative nonfiction essays to include emotional, lyrical moments that evoke my personal history. The essays focus on my developing identity in conjunction with external influences, namely the impact of people and places. I have written essays and other short prose pieces that describe who I am in the wake of living with a very ill and addicted father; the essays circle a theme of recovery. I experienced a childhood marred by alcoholism and abuse that caused my struggles with anorexia, perfectionism, and an abusive romantic relationship in my early twenties that nearly claimed my life. Having recovered from these circumstances, I wrote about them. Memories of trauma can be painful, so I moved cautiously as I worked to describe in full detail the series of struggles I endured. My recovery from trauma was accomplished with the help of Ralph Waldo Emerson. People and texts that were disconnected from my family system became instrumental to the development of these essays. Emerson's essays, and my connections to them, are identified as a productive method for accepting my family's fate. I connected with Emerson's deep affiliation with the New England landscape, and geographical places in New England and in Kansas are also influences upon my maturation in the essays as they move forward.

Dedication

I am thankful first, last, and always, to my husband Dan. He is a source of constant joy, intellect, and love. He moved to Kansas – *Kansas!* I love him – there is no other way to say this.

I am thankful to Ben and Julie, who are beautiful. They are my lost siblings, my best friends, my family.

I am thankful to Nate and Leigh Ann, Joanna, Meghan, and the entire McCarthy family, for demonstrating how to live life fully, with humility and grace.

I am thankful to all my students for giving me the heart to know that each person has a memory to tell.

I am and will always be grateful to have studied, worked with, and gotten to know Doug Atkins. His wisdom, patience, and compassion are unmatched. His support and guidance have changed my life, both in writing and in living.

Likewise, Michael Johnson, Michael Valk, and Ken Irby have given me kernels of kindness, strength, and beauty that I take with me wherever I go.

I am grateful to my confidant, my reason for doing all this, my biggest supporter – to my mother, who left, and found her way back home.

And to my father. Dad, one day soon, let's put on some old Dylan records on a rainy afternoon. I owe it to you; I took too much for granted, I got my signals crossed. Just to think it all began on a long-forgotten morn.

Acknowledgements

- “Letchworth State Park” *The Chesapeake Reader* 3.1 (Summer 2009). 1.
- “The Facts As They Are.” *Prick of the Spindle* 2.4 (2008).
- “Ask for Nothing.” *Melusine* 1 (July 2009).
- “Definitions: A Historical Approach.” *DIAGRAM* 8.2 (December 2008).
- “Shift and Sway.” *Paradigm* The Elliott Issue 6 (Spring 2008).
- “Shift and Sway.” Reprint. Reprinted in *Paradigm Volume 2*. Columbus, OH: Rain Farm Press, December 2008. 125-33.
- “Appalachia.” *Pure Francis* (Summer 2009). 1.
- “Papaya Whip Yellow and Bisque Lobster Pink: Or, Considering the Colors of Ash and Glass; the Orchids in Our Days.” *Emprise Review* (March 2009).
- “A Pattern of Light.” “A Pattern of Light.” *Under the Sun* 14.1 (2008): 57-63.
- “Open & Close.” *Language and Culture.net* (forthcoming Fall/Winter 2009).
- “Teaching the Self to Speak.” *Emprise Review* 8 (May/June 2009).
- “Halves.” *The First Line* (August 2009). 60-62.
- “Behind Us, the Full Neighborhood.” *Fourth River* 4 (Fall 2007).
- “On Forgiving.” *The Road Home* Ithaca University Press, pending.

Elements for an Atlas

Table of Contents

Opening the Atlas: An Introduction	viii-xvii
Section One: My Father & Other Immeasurables	1
Moving	2
Anxiety	3-4
Nuts	5-14
The Air	15-17
Identifying [with] Identities	18-26
Letchworth State Park	27
The Wait	28-30
The Facts as They Are	31-41
Things Checked on a Wish List	42-43
Vacancy	44-51
Ask for Nothing	52-61
Return	62
Girl with Cat	63-71
Before	72
Section Two: Color Schemes	73
Lavender	74
Definitions: A Historical Approach	75-78
On Place: The Essence of Movement	79-90
Shift and Sway	91-99
Appalachia	100-101
A Friend's Apartment; A Snowstorm	102
Papaya Whip Yellow and Bisque Lobster Pink; or, the Orchids in Our Days	103-109
Color Scheme	110-112
A Pattern of Light	113-120
The Flower Shop	121-129
Open & Close	130-136
Section Three: Circles and Spheres	137
My Father Figure	138
Emerson Speaks	139-149
Teaching the Self to Speak	150-156
A Mother's Memoir	157-162
Circles II	163-173
Different Ways out of Town	174-180
Halves	181-183
Section Four: The Map of Me	184

Behind Us, the Full Neighborhood	185
On Forgiving	186-190
Unforgiving	191-198
The Interview	199-205
Lyme Disease	206-211
Inventory	212-219

Opening the Atlas: An Introduction

On a Saturday afternoon in the early summer, my apartment doorbell buzzed. I peered down the long, first-floor hallway and found my father standing at the glass entrance, waving madly. I walked slowly, wondering where my mother was. I opened the doors and said hello, looking behind him for reassurance that he was not alone. He should not have been alone.

He was wearing a winter coat. I asked him if he wanted to come in, but he refused. He wanted to take a walk. I felt the rush of goose bumps, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up.

He took my hand and we walked. The ivy on the buildings swayed. We sat on a bench. Finally, he turned to me. His eyes were red and swollen.

“I can’t stop lying,” he said.

I deposited my father into my parents’ narrow living room, leaving him sitting across from my stony and furious mother. I drove home in a dusk tinged with ochre hues.

My dissertation began because I turned the car around after many years, and began to drive back toward home. I have written a collection of essays to include emotional, lyrical moments that evoke my personal history. The essays here display a coherence of my developing identity that cannot ignore or displace external influences, namely the impact of people and places. I experiment with fragmented essays that prioritize acute memory and image over the chronology of events. It is my hope that the reader uncovers his or her own emotional response to my memories, because my intention is to establish a human-to-human connection. I have tried to retrace the steps that drove me from, and led me back to, my father.

My father is a recovering alcoholic and a drug addict, and he suffers from either manic depression or narcissistic personality disorder -- his lying prohibits clarity on this point. I have

written essays and other short prose pieces that describe who I am in the wake of living with a very ill and addicted father; the essays circle a theme of recovery. I experienced a childhood marred by alcoholism and abuse that caused my struggles with anorexia, perfectionism, and an abusive romantic relationship in my early twenties that nearly claimed my life. Having recovered from these circumstances, I began to write about them. Memories of trauma can be painful, so I moved cautiously as I worked to describe in full detail the series of struggles I endured.

I began to wade through memories methodically to uncover the central feeling I experienced in each. I remember events out of order, and I revisited my father in his various stages of addiction. Soon, I could identify again with my old self, the self who tried to fix my parents' marital troubles and who appeased a dangerous man in college because I feared confrontation. In order to mold these memories into meaning, I wrote them down. Memories flooded back.

There was my father's rare smile during a hike, there was my lover J.'s first act of violence, there was a lake shimmering in southern New Hampshire after a summer rainstorm. My life returned to me in fragments and pieces. Taking shape, they forged bridges from one to the next. Soon, I was grappling with an identity I could claim as my own. Creative nonfiction has afforded the space in which to reconstruct and document my personal history in the forms of fragmented, lyric, and personal essays.

The essays are accurate in detail and are focused on real, lived moments. In each piece, I attempt to render an emotional truth that connects with a moment or event. In essence, each memory has found a place, a home, in the form of an essay. Once I began to write essays about my father, for instance, I began to witness connective tissue. I saw how the forms of addiction manifested themselves in my own life. Thus, essays about my struggle with anorexia and essays

dealing with my own abusive relationship are intrinsically linked because, psychologically, these struggles can be traced back to the influence of my father. My dissertation is an exploration of my family in modes of crisis, even when we did not recognize the crisis. My dissertation is as much a complex portrait of my father as it is of myself.

I discovered in kindergarten that my father reveled in telling me lies, which I then told to my classmates, and they laughed and pointed fingers at me. My father's lying is incessant and constant. The pathology of his lying became important when I started to write about him because there are large gaps of time and information missing, such as when or how he lost every job he ever had. I started writing about my father as a way to understand him. One specific memory would lead to another, and soon, I was back in our black dining room, age ten, having a fight with my father. In another memory, I am young, maybe seven, and I cannot learn the multiplication tables. My father is yelling at me, a gin-and-tonic splashing from the glass as he shakes the table. Writing triggered more memories. I understood why I had forgotten moments of severe trauma, and how they connected to who I have become. I struggled to find memories that led to more positive moments. As I wrote detailed memories, I discovered that I had ignored or driven many painful events into my subconscious mind; writing brought them back.

In his book *The Addict*, Michael Stein writes, "But each addict has a story, and the story of the illness, and what writer can resist that?" (12). I cannot resist the urge to explore addiction from the perspective of a child burdened with her father's mental instability and addictive behaviors. As an only child, I was forced to cope alone with my parents' near-constant fighting and my father's struggle with substances. I demonstrate how an addict's illnesses impact others. If I wasn't making him happy, I was making him angry, and thus I spend a good deal of section one as a narrator exploring my attempts to have a relationship with my father, usually as a

caretaker. It is incredibly difficult for a child to care for an addicted parent, and even in my early twenties, I found it difficult when my father was suicidal and unable to stop drinking on his own, even when he lost his house, his wife, and his cars. Due to emotional reactions to my memories, I have put the most intense memories into short prose pieces. They open section one to recreate the confusion and the blurry sense of reality that occurred each time my father needed my help during his mental breakdowns. These more lyric moments focus on the strange images of my father in memory because they are acute and vivid.

Section one's other "immeasurables" include personal relationships that have influenced who I am – namely, with my mother and my former boyfriend J. My mother emerges in section one as a friend and as a more positive influence because she was my only stable caretaker. She is thus represented in the essays in section one as a parent, a friend, and as a source of possible safety.

When I graduated from college, I met a man named J. who was very handsome and very wealthy. He was charming and dangerous. I was unknowingly seeking a partner who was akin to my father: an alcoholic, a drug addict, a perpetual liar -- and mentally ill. J. was bipolar and isolating, and before long, he became physically abusive, once making an attempt on my life. As I went back through my memories, it was clear what I had done; I had replicated the relationship that was modeled for me as I grew up. I had chosen my father for myself. Thus, J.'s impact on my loss of self-esteem is a focus in section one. He remains a looming, vivid presence, and I have written him as a dark, shadowy figure. As with my father, there are unanswered questions about J.'s former life that have never been answered, and both have been diagnosed with manic depression. In my prose and in my personal life, I have worked to distance myself from J.

I work through memories as a dancer works through choreography: fluidly yet slowly, learning the steps and returning to them to get them right. I process a sequence in ballet and a sequence of memories, the way a painter might survey a scene for a painting: with care and with an eye for the center of the image. The dancer knows her place on stage as much as an essayist knows the critical image needed within a personal essay.

I remember midnight. My father is carrying a green beer bottle out to the front lawn, and I am soaking my dancer's toes in a red bucket on the grey concrete stoop out front. My father sits and waves me forward. His face is red, and his brown eyes look happy behind a mask of slight mania. He is watching for a predicted carnival of stars to light up the sky. I have been granted access to the show because my mother is tired of waiting with him on the lawn. The sky is a deep shade of blue, almost cobalt. The shooting stars never emerge, but the memory stays with me, and I remember it because of the image of me and my father joined together by the thick midnight sky, watching for a bright miracle.

Images and places of importance guide section two; I slowly form a wider circle around the focus of my family. I break out of the essays in section one and draw on images to recollect specific events and places that hold particular meaning in my life. I found it reassuring to discover how a specific geography impacted my life. I began to explore places where I have lived and found that each one held a set of memories. For instance, my parents' house in Fairport, New York, became a place where I developed my independence in the face of experiencing fear. My extended family's homes in New Hampshire became safe havens and places of comfort and warmth. New Hampshire is a critical point of discovery for me. The landscape of pines and lakes, and of mountains and dirt roads, is in my memory a positive influence upon my upbringing.

Short prose pieces appear throughout; these lyric essays have the specificity of a prose poem, and they are guided by images. A recurring image in section two is an Appalachian town where a friend was living. His depression astonished me. I was likewise saddened because the town was cavernous and bleak – one mirrored the other. Because my friend was so intensely unwell, and because the geography was so distressing, with its sooty hills and dilapidated houses built into the hills, I chose to use the lyric essay to accentuate the depravity and the intensity of my reaction to my friend and the Appalachian landscape. These short prose pieces offer specific images as focal points between essays.

Section two holds to Terry Tempest Williams's tenet: "The landscapes we know and return to become places of solace. We are drawn to them because of the stories they tell, because of the memories they hold" (244). As I reflected upon my growth as an individual, I saw that important landscapes connect me to people in my life. And as I moved through my experiences, I embraced the images that were most forthcoming, as they helped to explain who I was and from where I had come. The images became sources of solace and reflection, and the essays fold into a series of geographical points.

After my father checked himself into his first rehabilitation center, in Minnesota, I began to settle into a more stable life. I opened up a book by Ralph Waldo Emerson and consumed his essays. In them, I found a source of immense comfort. Emerson believed that only when we accept instability in our lives can we find any true solace. In "Circles" he writes, "People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them" (199). I felt that I had hope in realizing that my family's upheaval and attempts at recovery would be constant. Once I began to accept my father as chronically ill, with constant addictive and reckless behavior, I was

able to move forward as an independent woman, a woman focused on her own sense of mental wellness and recovery from abuse.

My recovery from trauma was accomplished with the help of Ralph Waldo Emerson. I began to reconnect and open myself to the outside world. People and texts that were disconnected from my family system became instrumental to my own development as an individual. Section three is an opening into my adult life with a narrator who is more mature and who tries to forge a future for herself by moving beyond the past. Reading Emerson's essays, I identified with a sense of transience as a method for accepting my family's fate. I connected with Emerson's deep affiliation with the New England landscape, and we walked together in the woods when I was lonely or wandering in my recovery. Emerson became a father figure, which helped me to write essays with a narrator who admired him as a daughter might admire her healthy father. I was in awe of him. Emerson was, in my psyche, the antithesis to my father – he was consoling and helpful. He was there when I needed him, if only in his writing. As I struggled to find peace as my family dissolved, and as my father moved from one rehabilitation facility to another, always on the brink of breakdown or death, I turned to Emerson to help me find balance and safety.

Section three is a turning point for me as I start to understand that I am no longer responsible for my father's health and that outside influences can help shape and reassure me. I come to recognize Emerson's influence upon me as I move from being a scared daughter in section one to a strong, healthy woman. I take another look at my mother and view her as a woman who is unable to settle for my father's half-truths. She is still looking to uncover my father's lies, and in section three, I allow a future for myself that doesn't need to know my father's "true" past. In many of the essays in this section, I vacillate between past and future. I

imagine a future for myself in which I am free from the burden of my father, and I try to see myself recovered, healthy. I include moments of teaching to demonstrate my growth as a person.

Today, my mother lives alone in a rental house in New Hampshire, and my father lives in a rental house in Minnesota. My father tells me about his therapy sessions, and indicates that his sabotaging, unstable behaviors are changing slowly. He wants to visit me in Kansas, but I hedge every time he asks when he can come. Dealing with an addict, or a mentally ill individual, is an ongoing process.

Section four advances into who I am today in the wake of learning how to deal with my father, and also how I can differentiate myself from my mother. The essays here focus on forgiveness and how complicated this process is. I also turn attention toward my mother in an effort to focus on how our relationship has been altered because of my father. My focus shifts in the end to how different my mother and I are as women rather than how similar I wished we were in the opening section.

It was natural for me to want to forgive my father; even in my essay writing, I was unable to elicit the hatred and anger that I once felt toward him. By moving on, I was charged with locating the exact emotional response I have currently for my father, and my emotional responses to him change frequently. As I have grown older, I have become more equipped to forgive him. Yet, my father falters and lapses, as he always will, and it became obvious that I could not simply write of my forgiveness. I also had to face and write about my unsettled and unforgiving emotions toward my father and my mother. I could not fully forgive my father and thus contradict myself with the essays in this closing section. I am not ambivalent, but instead realize I am pulled in two directions: I forgive and I don't forgive my father, and I live with this vacillation today. I also forgive and don't forgive my mother, who was my primary caretaker and

also the caretaker who left me to deal with my suicidal father alone. The essays here reflect this emotional quandary with honesty, because I live this existence day-to-day.

There isn't a proper way to complete the writing of my family history, because, even though we all live apart now, we are still connected. I attempt to write about moments when my father reappears in my memory as I move through my days; he is a presence that haunts and occasionally comforts me now. I also write about my true feelings toward my mother when I last saw her; she was anxious and sorrowful. I was forced to be honest about her depression in the closing section; she is evolving and changing, and I am part of that process. I relate my experiences with my mother today to Nancy Mairs's in her essay "On Being Raised by a Daughter" when she observes that "A daughter can't spend a lifetime raising her mother any more than a mother can spend a lifetime raising her daughter; they both have other work to get on with" (76). I see myself now not as a caretaker of my parents but as a daughter who has grown independent of them in order to live a full, productive life. Thus, my essays in this section attempt a certain directness to illustrate how I see my parents and how I see my relationship with each one as we change through the years. I try to celebrate my fledgling independence and my strength as a woman who has recovered from emotional and physical abuse.

My essays portray a woman who can and does recover from trauma, a woman who evolves. I begin as a child forced to witness and live with an ill parent, and I move through stages of grief for my father and for the effects his illnesses have had upon me. I close as a woman with a blooming identity, someone who is open to change and the possibility of forgiveness.

In my memory, I see my father as if he is facing a three-way mirror: I can see all sides of him, but not simultaneously. I see in one mirror how similar I am to him. I see his diseases in

another. I see his ripple effects in another; there are cracks in the image. Nowhere in his reflections can I see myself – he is standing too close. My dissertation has given me a different mirror in my own room in which fully to see and realize myself, and my reflection is strong, stalwart, and now clear.

Section One

My Father & Other Immeasurables.

Moving

In the old basement, my first color drawing sits, all yellow and pink, the flowers a mess of red underneath a blue sky. My girlhood dresser settles within its knotted panels, backed against a concrete wall. The drawers are stocked with letters from my past. In one, I find a letter composed when I learned cursive, its fancy flourishes. The greeting remains:

Dad,

Hello.

Anxiety

I. I hear sounds all day long that no one else does. I hear the ticking of the watch in the bedroom, and the off-beat of the kitchen clock, working against that watch to get the same time. Tick tock. It's exhausting. At night, I hear the footfalls of the downstairs neighbors, their breathing, the click-clack of their high heels when they get home from a nice dinner out. I used to put earplugs in, but I contracted too many ear infections and missed the sound of my husband's breath.

I didn't used to be like this. But then, my father started to fall against hallway walls late at night, when everything else was quiet, and that shattering veined its clear way to me.

A boyfriend pounded on windows until they broke. He pushed me until, finally, the sound of breaking was all I could hear, even in the safety of the law.

Now, the clink of ice in a cold glass is too much to bear. The shriek of the snow melting, slicing off the roof, causes panic in my bones. The mailman's casual walk is enough to make me sweat. Night is the worst, that time when you can't hear anything behind you. You can only go by the ear canal and its thorough yet inconclusive pumping.

Sometimes, I remember only the way something sounded, the waves on the lake before a chair came through a window. Or the crunch of toast underneath someone's loud teeth. The gravel beneath an unfamiliar car in the drive, the swinging hinge of the rusted screen door, the fire crackling in its low pit. At night, trying to sleep, I trick myself into these old noises to drown out the rest.

II. It's always about fathers, isn't it? It's always at the back of the book, the core of the murder, the eleven o'clock news lead. The father and who he was. Did he lose his job? Yes. Did he steal from someone close to him? Yes. Did he isolate? Yes. Did he drink? Yes. Gamble? Yes. Yell? Oh yes. The question is never if it's about the father – it's instead where to locate him, why to try, what to say then.

Nuts

The first things to go are the fingers. They stop moving, they tingle, then they're dead weight, a thousand pounds each. Then the tongue goes numb, a weighty piece of un-swallowed flesh filling my mouth, making it hard to stay calm. The panic raises my heart rate and my vision splits. I can see only half of the room, half your face, and the periphery of everything is darkness. The headache arrives now, in full force, a knife in the back of the left eye, then another wounding pain in the back of the head. I know it's serious when the bile rises in my throat, that putrid taste of sour eggs. The bile means business, signifying danger, dehydration, and vomit. I vomit in trash cans, in hallways, and finally make it to a bathroom, where I vomit for hours. The vision is always the first sense to return, as if to provide witness to the damage that has been done.

When I turned fifteen, I became stricken with headaches. They leveled me. I first experienced a tingling sensation in my mouth and my tongue went numb, an odd feeling. Then my fingers went numb, followed immediately by my hands. I lost half my vision, like one side of a split screen on *The Brady Bunch* when Marcia is on the phone with her best friend. I could only see Marcia, and barely. Then a headache behind my eye – that was there, usually, before the symptoms, and I tried my best to disregard that intense, circular pain. These issues were followed by disorientation, dizziness, and finally profuse and lengthy vomiting. I was out of commission for days. When I awoke, I felt lighter, airier, and fragile. Laughing made my skull echo.

I always awoke to find my mother at my side. She would be watching me. I was always in pajamas, and had no memory of hours, or even days. We did not know what was happening to me. This was a new development in our family's health history. We were typically a family of

minimal health concerns; we were stringy, skinny, and active people. My mother always handed me crackers and water, begging me to eat.

These headaches could not have come at a worse time. I was becoming a woman in a family that flew from the room at the mention of sex, and my father had recently moved back into our house. Tensions were already high and would rise with each pile of vomit I left in the hallway. My father had been commuting from Dallas all the way back to us in Fairport, New York, in order to keep a job at IBM. When he was away, I flourished. I was allowed to have friends over, and he wasn't there to be sloshed and mean to me in front of them. My mom and I made what we wanted for dinner, and I was allowed to start eating salads in place of meat. My father sent us pictures he took of himself every so often. They were always shot after a long run; I noticed that his rooms were bare and vacant. My mom explained that he was attempting to stop drinking, and had replaced the habit by obsessive distance running. All the photos were of him in his rented apartment, dripping with humid sweat, skinny as a pole.

He came home less and less, and it was marvelous, a time when my mom and I bonded, connected. She was open to me becoming myself, and I stopped hating her for staying with my father for all these pre-pubescent years. Still, we worried over the day when he would return; we could both tell from his dark self-portraits of his naked torso, ribs hanging out, that he was becoming more unhinged.

My father was scheduled to arrive home in the middle of a blizzard. His flight was re-routed to Buffalo. When the plane landed, my father called my mother and demanded that we drive the two hours in the snow to pick him up. He refused to rent a car. So my mother, whose greatest fear was driving in snow, packed up the car and we drove twenty miles an hour to get my father. When we arrived, he was on the curb with all his luggage and I could already tell he

was fuming. He put his bags in the trunk that was heaped with fresh snow, stuck his head in the back seat to say, "Hi, Samantha," and ordered my mother to get into the passenger seat. "Craig," she mildly protested, and he said forcefully, "Now." On the dangerous drive home, everyone was silent. I felt my fingers tingle, then go numb. When we arrived home and after I was finally in bed, the numbness abated.

My mother hinged her theory about my headaches on my late adolescent development; I did not start menstruating until I turned fifteen, which was strange to her. I weighed ninety pounds. My ovaries were that of a child. The hormone fluctuations must be ravaging my body, she mused. At least, that's what she hoped.

It would be months before my parents took me to a doctor for my debilitating condition. In history class, overtired and sick, I lost half my vision as we watched *All Quiet on the Western Front*, not a calming movie. The lights were off, and my boyfriend had passed a note to me. I could not see it in my field of vision. I rose from my seat and found the door thanks to a tiny sliver of hallway light pulsing through. I turned the handle, rocked into the wall, and vomited into a trashcan. I somehow made my way to the nurse's office. The next thing I remember is a senior dropping me off at home in his Jeep. He was thanking me for letting him drive me home. I wiped my cheeks and lips with the back of my hand. I somehow got inside. After that, all I see is darkness.

In another memory of this early condition, all I see is a pink afghan, projectile vomit, and my father screaming at me. He is following me through the house as I try to locate a bathroom. The one on the first floor is tiny, and I cannot find the door. I see the hallway, I see the framed photo of the town of Fairport, New York, and then I remember that familiar taste of pure bile in

my mouth. Bile coats my teeth and all I can hear are my father's footsteps behind me, menacing. He's yelling about the vomit on the walls.

The final straw was when my father took me and my mother to his favorite bar, a British pub, in the city. We sat and sampled cheeses at a booth, and my parents drank British beers. My boyfriend was present. I remember asking my father if I was eating cream cheese. I remember him laughing at me. I remember vomiting behind the bar in their industrial-sized trash bin and a fierce headache. Then, I see the world rushing by in the car. It was snowing. I covered my mouth to prevent bile and vomit from staining the car seats; they were beige and my father would get mad. My fingers were covered with vomit when we pulled up to our house. Then I hear a basketball game on television, and blackness covers my memory.

In hindsight, I think my parents should have taken me to the hospital. I was always dehydrated and scared that year. I almost failed my history class because of vomiting and sightlessness after lunch. Instead, my mother blamed hormones, my father got angry, I started losing chunks of memory, and I turned on my family.

I began hiding symptoms from my parents because the house was a ball of constant stress. My father was looking for work, and we were confused about this. Didn't he have a job lined up when the one in Texas was finished? We asked him this once at dinner. He opened a bottle of wine, smugly drank a glass at the table, and told me and my mother that we had no idea what we were talking about, that the consulting business was different from whatever it was in our small, puny girl-brains, and to lay off him. Even when I lost half my vision in times like this, I smiled and put my head down and tried not to make him worse. I started spending a lot of time at friends' houses, or in my room with the door closed.

When my parents finally took me in for testing, the doctors started with hormone treatment. Because I was sixteen then, they put me on a birth-control pill with the expectation that I understood its implications. I did. My father sat me down in his special leather chair one night, very drunk, and told me that if I ever did *anything* with my boyfriend, he would be so disappointed that he would never look at me the same again. My mother stood behind me in the kitchen, almost whispering, “Now, Craig, she’s only sixteen,” and, “That’s enough,” but he kept at me, setting new ground rules – boys could never be in my bedroom, and at no time could a boy enter the house if my father wasn’t at home. The rules were, to me, overprotection building toward insanity. Most of my friends were boys; since we lived near the high school, they came by all the time, especially when my father was away. But now my father came home early from the office, or wherever he had been, meeting me at the door on my way in, peering over his shoulder for potential suitors, or my boyfriend. It was impossible to share his space. This, coupled with the sudden shock to my system from hormone treatment, immediately made my condition worse.

The doctors asked me to keep a food journal. It proved two things: one, I was triggering migraines during lunch, and, two, I was developing an eating disorder.

The doctors ordered an MRI and a CAT scan, and both turned out minimal results. I do not remember either one in any detail, except one required me to be hooked up to tiny electrodes that were stuck to my head, and the neurologist was a woman who wore yellow clogs. I liked her for that.

No one asked me about my weight loss. I was restricting calories almost without knowing it was occurring; I was simply trying in my small way to control an uncontrollable situation: my father’s rigid cruelty. And because we are a thin family, it didn’t seem like a problem at the time.

Likewise, not one doctor questioned me about stress. I wondered if they could see stress on my face when I arrived for these appointments. My father insisted on coming into the room with me, because he insisted that he had medical knowledge and could be of use. He was also growing more paranoid about the outside world and his overprotection was no longer nurturing. I never had the chance to ask for help or to indicate that my household situation was unbearable. Instead, when the doctors couldn't narrow my intensifying health issue down, my father blamed me on the way home. He told me to stop eating sugars, to come home earlier on weekends, to stop seeing my friends. I nodded like a good girl, starved myself, got good grades, and tried as hard as I could to put an end to this miserable situation.

Finally, my food journal yielded a result. When I stopped eating nuts, the symptoms got better. It seemed that nuts were triggering migraines. And I noticed that when I ate at my best friend's house for dinner, or slept over, there were no migraines then, either.

When I stopped eating nuts, I imagined that the migraines were over. They were not, mainly because I was living with one. On a few afternoons during the school week, I arrived home from high school to an empty house, and I was asked to walk the dog, but only in the yard, because my father was paranoid about the neighbors. So, I took the dog around and around the house in sweeping circles. One afternoon, after a boy stopped by and I had to tell him that he wasn't allowed inside, my hands went numb. I remember looking over my shoulder to see if my dad was parked across the street and had seen the boy. He had pulled this trick before, only to fly into the house raging at me. I remember trying to list what I had eaten that day; nothing came to mind. Maybe some cereal. I tasted the tell-tale bile, and I could not longer feel the dog's heavy leash in my hand. I panicked and took her inside. I think I locked the door.

Because the migraines made my father angry, and because I was sick of his yelling, I remember making a sandwich (peanut butter), and slicing an apple very, very carefully with my half-vision and numb hands. I thought this would prepare my father to see that I was eating a balanced diet when he arrived home to find me semi-conscious. The pain and the symptoms were getting worse with each episode. I remember calling my mom, speaking gibberish – this was the point in my life when migraines began to rob me of coherent speech. She must have called my father. What I remember next is my father in his work clothes, screaming at me, tossing the apple core to the floor where I had crumpled. I remember nothing more of that day.

Once, on a bus in New York City during a high-school trip, I trembled with nerves. I don't remember what season or year it was. I remember wearing a green tank-top and eating a giant pretzel. I remember being nervous about the outside world, watching the people walk down Park Avenue, and tasting bile in my mouth. I remember thinking that I did not want to go home. Then my hands went numb, and I started speaking nonsense to my best friend. She asked the driver for a garbage bag – a smart girl, she was – and I vomited into it. Afterwards, as I vomited next to a tiny bird on a sidewalk, I began to laugh alongside my friend, who was also laughing at the absurdity. “You're okay, you're far from home,” she said and watched the bird skirt my bile. It was insightful; she knew being far from rather than close to home was a relief. The migraine abated.

My mother could be my biggest ally. When she and my father fought, I listened to her defend me to him. He raged about me breaking curfew, having a boyfriend, not getting high-enough grades. He was angry most of the time. She tried quelling his ire as I slept. I developed anxiety anyway. I stopped eating dinners at home, which helped me control my weight and allowed me to leave the house at night. I started running miles and miles to impress my father. I

asked him to run with me for extra practice, but runs always ended in a fight every time, as he insisted on running behind me, criticizing my technique, my arms, my strides. At home, to my mother, I would recount, "I can't do anything right," and she placed her hands on my back. When I joined the track team, my father resisted attending my local meets. They were too far away to drive safely, too wedged in bad city neighborhoods for him to feel safe. My mother brought my Uncle Lee, and clapped for me. I never won; I was too high-strung to compete calmly. I just watched the healthier girls run circles around me, straight into their fathers' arms.

By my senior year in high school, my migraines eased off; I was never home because my father resumed a familiar schedule of heavy drinking. I had begged my mother to leave him, playing with her costume jewelry as I did it, out of nerves. I handled perfect, round pearls as I told her I would come with her, wherever we had to go, to get out. He did not hit her until the end, but I could tell this was coming, and I was going to college soon. She refused.

In college, I rarely had a migraine. But during my freshman year, when I called my parents to tell them that I was going home with my new college boyfriend for the weekend, my father triggered one of my worst. He told me I couldn't go. He screamed through the phone at how ungrateful I was, how he would disown me if I went, how loose a woman I was, how I had lost my moral compass. It was early evening; he was drunk. I trembled on my dorm-room cot. I sobbed. Despite having a hard time with my father, I worked hard at never, ever letting him down. I reported grades and accomplishments with ease. I feared him.

Before I knew it, I lost my vision. I could not stand. I hadn't explained my condition to my roommates, so no one knew what to do. I stumbled to the bathroom, sick. I stayed there for hours. I vaguely remember someone pulling me to my room. In the morning, someone brought me cereal, which I tried to eat. I was slowly regaining my senses. The phone rang. It was my

father. “I need you to know something,” he said. Silence. “I want you to know I am proud that you stood up to me. I don’t care if you go away this weekend. It was more of a test, you know, to see if you’d stand up for yourself. You did.”

I was too upset to move. I felt my hands tingle again. I took a deep breath, thanked him, and got off the phone.

My father loves lying. He would lie about a new job, a new pay increase, a new refinancing plan in order to get out from under mounds of debt. Because I hid my headache symptoms for so long, I hid anorexia in college just as easily, though food always drew me back if I didn’t have to eat at my father’s table. As I aged, I noticed my health change as my life improved. Away from my father, my migraines lessened. Away from my father, my eating slowly increased. By my senior year in college, I was eating candy again, and I was migraine-free.

I have slowly exhausted my primal interest in uncovering my father’s demons. They are clear to me now. But I have worked hard to suppress the past. I have worked even harder to see it clearly, in its painful glory of screaming matches.

My father has been, or is, in jumbled succession, paranoid, depressed, suicidal, euphoric, manic, an alcoholic, a pain-pill addict, a recovered addict, a heart-attack survivor, a manic depressive, and a man with narcissistic personality disorder. My father picks his illnesses and glorifies them. It is an effort to get my mother back. It is failing.

The last migraine I had was recent, after a call from my father. This was not a coincidence. I had been avoiding all nuts. He called one night when my husband was away, and he told me of more new developments in his world of mental instability. He outlined the lies he’d

told of the previous two years, claiming that he was no longer addicted to pain pills. He paused. He said that he was dangerous, a sociopath. He said he had always been one. I was alone, with nothing to say. In the morning, my head pounded and I stood over the toilet bowl, bile in my throat. That's as far as it went, though. No vomit. By mid-morning, I was lucid, able to feel my limbs. I celebrated the stamina of my own reaction to my father.

The story of my family is found in the pulse of my migraines. It was and is the brain matter of protection, armed with vivid pain and the ease of release. The migraines I suffered tell only part of the story of our lives, and they compound authenticity with their darkness. But they were and are mine. The numbness recedes, and my synapses flash, and the brain recalls both pain and pleasure as a passenger on a bus might understand them – fragments of a life seen, lived, known.

The Air

I. She

If only she would eat the avocado, its middle plush. She sits across from me at dinner; the summer air is wet. A thin strip of cheese drips off my hamburger bun. Mosquitoes fly at it, hurtling forward, grazing her face and her sallow cavernous cheeks. Her breath is a thing of distance, her eyes vacant and unfixated. Finally, she pierces the knife into the crocodile skin, the pulp thick, her hand wavering, her teeth a mesh of smile.

The tedious circular cutting plunges a split between halves. At this blue night hour, her struggle ripens, the fork lifting bits of green into her pursed, sour mouth. Around us, nobody notices her bony fingers tremble, the skin across her clavicle shifting across the sly, cutting bone. In this humidity, her body sweats; she's drenched in salt, the weight of it, the water light, the air, the only thing left.

II. Letter to Old Self

Dear Self,

I love avocados. What I hated was your fear of ripe weight, a heavy thigh, cream with your coffee, or butter on your toast. When Dad praised your frame, you gloated. You ran farther during track practice and then did sit-ups before bed. Dad told you how to lift your legs to get what he called a six-pack. You got one and used it for all your ballet recitals. In the mirror, you reveled in your frame, the bony knees, the big nose you saw. You never saw the flesh tightening across your abdomen and you never counted on your bones to push back, to egg you on, to break and snap like twigs.

You trained yourself to hate eating. You watched people's faces glaze over as they crunched a salty potato chip. You witnessed creamy glee when the lids of ice-cream containers were peeled back, smooth and clean as vanilla. You watched the licks of the lips.

By the end, you loved hip bones but hated to sleep; it was simply too taxing. Bones pushed you into the mattress. You loved wearing halter tops but hated people asking if you had always been so skinny. You hated the salesgirl at the Gap who said to you, "You're so lucky; you'll never have to worry about your weight." She said this to you when you were twelve. All you thought about was your weight and how to lose all of it. You smoked. You starved. You ran. You wore the striped, tight dress that was sold to you.

Finally, you picked up a bagel and you ate it. You put your cautious hand into the center and ripped it apart. You dipped it in cream cheese. You drank juice and recovered as a child does: with help and in front of the TV. You ate and watched the news. You refocused on the world around you. You quit ballet and broke up with your boyfriend. You stopped listening to women who cut their meals into halves, then quarters.

Today, you pretend that you don't have the urge to throw everything into the trash that you should be eating. I ignore you and I stop eating with you. I am mad at you, because some days, you are me.

I eat in public and I love the sounds of it. Give me an avocado and I will discard only the skin and the pit. I will scrape the insides and let the sweet, calorific mesh nourish me like the sun. I

mix the pulp with tomato, onion, and lemon, and lick salt from my palm as I offer myself guacamole. This is what this is about: serving myself. No longer do I sit across from you at the table, quaking with hunger. I eat you up with my mouth and I digest you as bile. I put your life into my mouth and chew.

Identifying [with] Identities: A Dilemma

Identity, n.: Sameness of essential or generic character in different instances; sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing; oneness.

Identify, v.: To cause to become identical; to conceive as united (as in spirit, outlook, or principle); to be or to become the same.

In the mirror, my first glance is not to compare my long, large nose with my father's, which is just the same, or to check for the slender cheekbones I share with my mother. It is instead to see what I look like that afternoon. It is to watch for stray hairs sticking up in my short ponytail. It is to make sure I am still, in fact, me, someone apart from my crazed father, my lonely mother, on days when I feel disjointed, displaced. Yet, all it does is remind me that I am my parents' only child.

My mother visits me in Lawrence, Kansas for the second time in three years. She flies in from New Hampshire; she has been living there ever since she left my father. My father lives in Minnesota, a state I could get to by car. This is too close for comfort, generally, for both of us. Today, when my mother gets off the plane, she looks older. When we come together to hug, it is without its typical fervor or compassion; it is like hugging a limp fish out of water. On the ride from the airport, we resort to what is standard fare of earlier days: gossip and badmouthing my father. By the time we arrive in Lawrence, the sun is dimming and we have torn through half of the reasons we can conjure to try to account for my father's madness. Trying to re-direct her, I point out the campus, "That's campus, that's where I teach," I declare. She glances and sighs, "You know, I just wonder now what your father does for a job." I nod. "Yup," I say, defeated, perplexed. It's not that I don't wonder at my father's job prospects, it's that he doesn't have any and we both know it. Is this who my mother has always been? Is this, in fact, me?

I grew up wanting to be more *like* my mother. As my hair grew darker shades of dirty blonde, year by year, I begged her to let me highlight it a golden hue akin to her natural one. When I discovered a talent in ballet, I worked on weekends to match her perfect tennis swings. My mother was meant for the sports I wasn't. At tennis, she won doubles and singles matches each summer, while I played against a wall until my serve and backhand weren't so pathetic, which never happened. Without siblings, I spent a great deal of time acquainting myself with tennis nets alone. I can recall my parents' marital problems aired in the form of discussions on the high school tennis court in early summer evenings. My parents' tennis game isolated me, and any brave nearby players; they fought their way through sets. "I asked you not to lease a new car, Craig," my mother wheezed as she shot the ball towards his head. "Fuck you," was often his backhanded reply. The sport my mother and I most often trained for was my father, which we both failed at ruinously, though our approaches were admirable.

On a fateful Saturday when I was an adolescent, my father decided that what this family needed was a good game of golf. He "suggested" an outfit for me, which evolved into red pants, tiny cleats, and a 1950's ruffled pink blouse. My father had a ritual about everything, including golf, with special shirts picked out depending on the season, the weather, and the company. Today, his shirt was grey. My mother, radiant as always, shone in her coral shorts and ponytail. Once on the course, it took one hole for my father to throw a club.

My mother teed off first, and had already advanced to the green where her ball had landed. I teed off next, shaking as my father corrected my stance, my swing, my hand position. The ball went two feet. "Here," he said, preparing, "watch me." My father stood, tense and slim, rocking back and forth before swinging. Soil and rock came up from underneath his club; the

ball was a white orb that shot awkwardly through space. His club followed shortly. “Damnit! Shit, Samantha!” he cried, running after the ball. I was left with the shiny clubs in the dull afternoon. I prepared to swing at my own ball again. “No, no!” My father, arms flailing, came back to me. “That was all wrong! Concentrate.” I took a quick stance, watched the ball, and tried again. This time, the ball shot right into the thick woods, where I retreated until my father shot, which took him closer to the green. I shot once more, barely advancing to the vicinity of the first hole, tethered hopelessly to my father’s neurosis and our terrible lack of skill at this sport.

Sometime in the last nine holes, my mother backtracked to tell me to “just relax. Have fun!” I growled, my body tense. Nothing advanced my ball or my father’s, and both of us were irate. After watching my father, hole after hole, I decided on our mutual problem: we overshot. My mother, by contrast, had managed to become friends with the family ahead of us.

On our way home, my father uncharacteristically stopped the car at an ice cream shop. Usually, trips like this ate time that he could have spent at home drinking on the deck. After ordering, we sat outside and listened to my mother read our scores aloud. Mine was unfinished. My father grumbled at his, “Well, if I hadn’t been helping *her* so much,” he said, pointing at me, “it would have been better.” I watched as my mom sighed; she dumped her cone into the trash can. I slurped my chocolate chip down to the last bit; my father, I noticed, did the same.

At my kitchen table in Kansas, my mother and I remember that day – the only day our family of three ever went golfing, or much less did anything together. “Usually,” my mother says, pushing her white bangs off her face, “we just went shopping, you and me, and then Dad went off by himself, pricing leather chairs, or stereo equipment.”

My father's penchant for speaker wire was unchecked, and was, as my mother puts it as she hefts tablespoons of sugar into her morning coffee, "how we ended up over three-hundred-thousand dollars in goddamn debt." This isn't shocking to me as she says it. My father loved spending money. As I aged, I watched my father fade and dim alongside his belongings; we shared vapid trials of spending to reduce feelings of self-consciousness, or self-doubt, but as I entered graduate school and got poorer, I also became much happier. When my father lost his small fortune, he settled into being a grizzled old man.

My mother steps out from her reflection in the bathroom mirror and into my small hallway and says, rubbing her cheeks, "You know, we should pick up some more of this lotion – I love it. And, I want to get you some new clothes. Not much, but some, okay?" I attempt a protest but she's already back in the mirror.

My father and I tried "bonding" over chocolate chip ice cream scoops at a local Carvel in town for a few winter months when I was twelve. On Sundays, we would gather ourselves into his pristine car, shoot through the neighborhood, order two scoops each in two small cups, and walk the nearly-closed strip mall across the lot. Members of a Jenny Craig came in and out, eyeing us in their sweats. My father lectured me about the importance of Roman history, why Bob Dylan changed the music industry, why he hated Tom Petty (he called him the copy-cat Dylan). I listened with the intensity of a hot cat, absorbed in the walls, the chips, the calm of his voice.

People in Carvel usually remarked that we looked "so alike." We did: skinny, wire-framed glasses that I hated, long noses. At least my blonde hair was hanging on, but otherwise, at twelve, I began to worry that I was too much like him in his antagonistic spirit and in his image

of intellectualism. He was too distant. He was mean to people that made him wait in a line. If his ice cream had ice chips in it, he returned it. He was demanding of perfection. I worried that I would be, too. I could sense it in the homework I belabored, the worries I ran through before bed, the gulch I dug in my stomach if I didn't get a solo in a ballet production. I saw, in the studio mirror at practice, either failure or my father, prodding me along.

Then, ice cream Sundays stopped. He took a job at IBM and temporarily relocated to Texas, a long commute from upstate New York, leaving behind my mother and me. This shifted my life. With him gone, I could openly fail at math. I could have my friends over for dinner, and stop worrying about him getting too opinionated and loud at the dinner table, drunk on bottles of merlot that I had trained myself not to notice. My mother and I learned how to use a screwdriver to fix something without a lunatic leaning over shouting obscenities at our mistakes or slow pace. We began to learn that we were self-sufficient, and could be a team of almost equals. Though she was the adult, I finally felt like I could match her, in running, in humor, and in looks. I started growing, and finally got breasts, though tiny. My mom allowed me to highlight my hair, so I chose to be as blonde as possible. I spent more time with the windows open, something my father hated. Soon, my mother and I laughed the same way, finished one another's sentences. By the time my father moved home, my mother and I were friends. I had a serious boyfriend, a social life, and a menstrual cycle. Anything my father and I had shared was gone; I worked as hard at erasing him from my face as I did applying to colleges. When I left for school each day, the reflection in my bathroom mirror most mornings was my mother's.

Years later, I entered my first year of graduate school in upstate New York and my father was forced to admit a secret: he lost his job at IBM. This was not a secret, it was just his own

purging of what we already sensed due to all the hours he spent at home in the afternoons. After his job in Texas, he would never work full-time again.

During her visit, my mother discloses to me that my father was fired from every job he ever held, except one, and that was because the company shut down. At dinner on her last night in Kansas, we drink too much wine together and commiserate. “Remember when you picked me up to go grocery shopping, right before I left for good?” she asks. It’s an unpleasant memory. “Your dad was too drunk to drive, and he was paranoid that the cars would be repossessed on the street.” I interrupt: “Mom, they were.” She pauses, sips. “I know, I know. Anyway, you took me to the store, and I had to get him beer? What a terrible time.” I nod. I recall following her through the store as she picked up beer, shrimp, crackers, soup, things she didn’t like or that my father didn’t need. “Mom, no beer,” I had hissed among people passing. We had been coming to this store since I was born. She looked around. “I know,” she had said, “but if he doesn’t get it, it’ll be worse.” Her face was flush, a peony pink, blotchy with stress. I remember her hair was a mess, with lipstick on her teeth, hastily applied. I remember wondering if this woman was my mother, the one whose strength had once been so apparent. Next to the packages of Oreo cookies, I vowed never to let this happen to me, never to let myself be this kind of victim, whatever it took.

A place, or a lack of one, can govern an identity. Just as my father’s sense of homelessness lingers as I develop into a stable individual in Kansas, my mother’s sense of New England as her home centers her life. With my mother in Kansas, I decide to take her to the English department awards banquet, to try to demonstrate my advancement in the past three

years. At the table, filled with faculty, she leans into me to whisper loudly, “Um, so do all these people,” pausing to point to my PhD exam committee members that I had already pointed out, “know our story?” I balk, lean back, furious. *Our* story? Have I let myself become bogged down by “our” story, by identifying with the domestic victimization that we had both fought so hard to erase? Erasure, however, is not departure nor is it healing, and when I nod, I know I have handed her a kernel of an old self that has gone deep into her pocket.

That kernel is troubling. I have always gone to my mother with social maladies, bad boyfriends, difficult friends. I have gone to my father for nothing. By the time I was mature enough to broach an adult-to-adult or even a father-daughter relationship, I realized he had taken my college loans and spent them, leaving me in a financial lurch; meanwhile, he could be found on his way to rehabilitation in Minnesota. I lived my life largely afraid of him, and when he was diagnosed with manic depression, the fear lessened and the sorrow grew, as did the distrust over landscapes we could not yet map. To cope with instability and rage, I put distance between us. He began a new life in a halfway house, and started mailing me postcards from the local art museum of work that he likes, especially Picasso. Instead of identifying with my father, I have worked very hard to distance myself from him entirely. I am unable to stare into that mirror.

My mother, on the other hand, has taken hold of all these previous tragedies, folded them, and rehashed them with me. *What color was his shirt that day, anyway? Well, what is your father doing for a job?* We identify through speculation and anger; this curse has set down a thick, heavy line between us. But instead of seeing that line, we tug at it, elongate it, make it a curve. Before we know it, we are sitting at my new kitchen table, amidst books and coffee, putting down my father piece by piece. It is as if no time has passed, though she is less energetic, and I am quieter. My hair is darker, and hers is white. But behind our eyes lurks our longing to

relate, to achieve a merged sense of a self, through a thirty-year age gap, to find ourselves in the other.

When we talk about my college friends, my mother misremembers them. When I disclose that I have not spoken to Lucy, a college roommate, for a year, she jumps in with, “You know, I never liked Lucy.” I am surprised, almost intimidated. Has she always liked *me*? When I take her to my favorite bookstore, and we come out of it into the cloudy afternoon, she bluntly says, “I liked the other bookstore better.” We had loved to shop together, but now, she wants only to sit at the kitchen table and read, silently. I wonder if she is feeling that line pull its weight again; she tugs hard to uncover my father and pulls back with distance.

Throughout her visit, friends remark on how similar we are. They tell us that we look alike, resemble one another, laugh with that identical twinkle. I have always yearned to look like my mother, but this time, entering the world as my own grown self, I wince. Her negative, sweeping statements, her judgmental demeanor, have come suddenly, a bitter, brisk wind, and have contributed to my fierce hold on my own identity. I know intimately how many years I have wanted to laugh together about the more popular girls, to feel a sense of camaraderie that wasn't forced. I know I look like my father, and have his sense of tension, and perfection, no matter the manifestations or consequences. But at my first kitchen table, with my husband at work, and my mother in her bathrobe, I can feel only the weight of the past, the clothespin strung on the wrong pants. I can no longer attach to her in these old ways, and she knows it. She brought my father into my life and she can't let him go. I have taken my father out of my life and I can't let him go.

Often now, I picture my mother alone in her small wooden house. I picture my father on a solitary marble bench, in an art museum, lost in Picasso's shallow room. I can see the ghosts of

my old selves wandering. I can relive my mother's laughter at my own kitchen table. I can relate to her frustration over high gas prices, and I still listen to the stories that she tells me over the long, heavy phone line. My parents and I are forging a new map, but the roads are not ready. There is a hidden map between me and them; it offers veins and blood, and paths out. The one we have now has us moving on one small road in only one direction, to only one home. The map we need is multifarious and un-grooved. It is bright, untried. Its paths greet us, my mother in the chill of a summer night, me in the humid storm of thunder, lightning, my father thrush in the lasting glimpse of that torrid rain.

We are aware of the paths and selves that don't merge. When I say goodbye to my mother at the end of our latest visit, I have my husband take her to the airport instead of doing it myself. I need her to find another road, another way to say goodbye. We stand in the cool, humid morning light, tears down our cheeks, confused. I am on the concrete sidewalk, waving goodbye, as she wipes her smooth cheeks. I watch the car move up the hill until it is a black dot at the end of the road. I go inside, to my own home, my own day, mapping the ends of the lines between all of us, loosely untying the fray.

Letchworth State Park

In the photo, I am three, listening to the hills' echo at the edge of the gorge, the grasses swaying, rocking me nearly to sleep, the sun so bright I have to wear a red sailor hat my mother chose for me. I want to coast down on the wind to the bottom of the enormous space, feel the hot earth and the clay cliffs, put my tiny hand on the bottom of the black recesses, puddles from last night's thunderstorm that left me shuddering in my too-small crib.

I don't understand that this park used to be full of footsteps on the thin hourglass shape of the sandgorged hills around me, breath in the grasses, slowly fading. Later, I will miss them, because no one is here.

Now, birds as big as ghosts hunt and chase. They soar above my red head. In the photo, I am smiling, because I can tell we'll leave soon, before my cheeks get pink with late afternoon light. Then, I will play in our backyard sandbox, shovel all the rocks together, pile them in, give them names, eat steak off the grill that my father made.

The Wait

Sometimes, I wait all day for my father to call me. It is normally a day that is rainy. I watch talk shows. I focus on Dr. Phil's moustache; it looks just like Uncle Lee's, my mother's lovely brother. Uncle Lee never drank too much and he always asked me how school was. Sometimes, my father, who would be standing in front of the fireplace, stoking the flames to get a fire going, would answer for me, "Oh, and did you see her brand new zit?" And my mother would gasp. Uncle Lee would slowly shake his head and refill his drink.

When I wait for my father to call now, I am an adult. I have outgrown middle school and his jokes. On the days when I wait to hear from him, it is because I know he is at a hospital getting treatment for manic depression, addiction, disorders. He recently purchased a bicycle on which he intends to ride throughout the winter. He lives in Minneapolis. He insists on spending money he doesn't have for tickets to the symphony. He sends me the CDs of the orchestra's best songs. When he is depressed, he never calls.

Usually, when my father is in a manic state, he calls and calls. He loves to leave messages on my answering machine about what time it is: we both live in the central time zone, so there is no time difference, but he doesn't care.

Often, I wait to call my father. I hate calling him. I hate hearing his phrases: "I've got a lot of job prospects right now," or "Well, I really love my new bicycle," and "You know, Dunn Brothers has the best coffee, hands down. Do you want a gift certificate there?" or, "All my doctors agree that I shouldn't be on any medication, it's really quite remarkable." My father

thinks being bipolar and being off medication is remarkable. I think it's insane. I don't like getting five cards in the mail from him in one day, or seeing ten new emails from him about coffee beans from Kenya. I don't like the way he lies.

When I finally decide to call my father, he asks me if it's okay if he calls me right back; he will never take my call outright. He says this is because he doesn't want me spending the money. When I was seventeen, he emptied out my savings account and blamed it on a bank error. I had saved up almost three thousand dollars for college. I tell him not to worry about the ten cents he'll owe me.

When my father and I finally get on the phone together, usually he's in his car, where I used to think he lived. He has since sent me a card from a true address. On Google Earth, it's a run-down house with a dirt driveway. We hear all sorts of hollow space in our phone call: I listen to the interior bell of his Jeep's door opening, and he must hear the range of laughter from a talk-show audience. He never asks what I'm watching, and I never ask where he is. The last time we talked, he said he had gotten his car window stuck all the way down and the snow came right in, right in! Could I believe it? he asked me. I waited a minute to answer, thinking, yes, I can believe it. He gets everything stuck and usually he needs someone to un-stick it. When he asks me if I have any questions for him, I wait again to answer. I say no. After all this waiting, there's nothing left to ask.

I wait for my father. I wait for him to arrive at my front door with an apology note amidst a fully blooming bouquet of tulips. I waited until the last minute at my wedding for him to walk me down the grass aisle. Uncle Lee was getting into place; he was my surrogate dad, ready on

the plush green lawn, the one who should give me away anyway. He was ready, even beaming. Then my father arrived, unrepentant. When he made his way across the yard, he handed me a sobriety chip. I had just put down my vodka tonic because I had stopped waiting.

Once, my father waited for me in a park across from my residence for hours because he had nowhere else to go. He waited and waited with the homeless people; he had become one of them. He waited as it got darker and colder. Rain fell as I parked my car and I had my key in the front gate of the apartment building when he came up behind me; his eyes were madness behind his glasses. His glasses had not been wiped off in quite some time. There was a whiskey smell. He asked to come in, but I was not ready. Even though he had been waiting all day for his only daughter, I turned to him and said no.

The Facts as They Are

January 1992

I am terrified to ice-skate. The rink is cold and my small hands shake as I try to tie the long white laces of my borrowed skates. My long hair gets in my way, tumbling forward, and I push it back in frustration. I am attending Christy Smith's twelfth birthday party, and I have tried hiding in the bathroom twice; both times I have been dragged back by Christy herself. When the music pumps on, and the man in the glass booth above us shouts in the microphone, "Open skate!" everyone shrieks and dives onto the ice. I cling for life to the sides. I am afraid the ice inside the rink will open up and swallow me.

I am terrified of ice because my mother told me that my grandfather died ice-skating on a frozen pond in the wintertime and that he fell through and drowned. I imagine him skating with a blue-and-white striped scarf, his back leg extended gracefully as he slides delicately across the white, chipping ice near dusk, the blades making a thin, clear line, tracing him. He reaches a soft spot, and before realizing it, the ice gives way and he plummets underneath, drowning. I imagine his red face, the hole his body makes that he tries peering through. I imagine the bulge of his eyes, the whites expanding with fear. I decide then that I will never ice-skate. I have kept to this promise, except to attend Christy's party, which I immediately regret. The fact is, I am a lousy ice-skater to begin with anyway.

February 1980

I am born into the world an only child. My father, a psychologist, counsels heroin addicts and tries to help them stay sober and clean. Addicts call the house at all hours; my mother repeatedly complains that she, and I, cannot sleep. She starts having nightmares that the callers

climb into the bedroom window, pry open the back door, and kill us. My father reassures her that this will never happen, and it doesn't.

We move to a suburb and my father becomes a businessman, working for Sibron and then IBM. He works long hours and starts to take his coffee black. He makes enough money for us to buy a house, and we stay there, in Fairport, New York, for over twenty years. In 1980, this feels cozy, a nuclear family anyone could be proud of having or belonging to. When he travels to London, he calls each night and listens to my baby gurgles over the phone.

December 2005

As we come out of a restaurant, shortly before my parents move, it starts to snow. My father has called me and my fiancé Dan to ask us for lunch at the pub, his favorite. We agree. At lunch, the dining area is quiet, and I occasionally hear the clang of a dropped fork, the soft lull of the wait staff as they pass time playing darts. My father keeps getting up and looking at the pictures on the walls, the maps of the London subway routes, the King's Crossing signs in bright, standard red. The only thing my mom eats is the chocolate mousse my father orders for everyone, "because it's close to Christmas." It is also close to the foreclosure date of their home.

March 2000

I am in college, and my father pays my tuition and housing expenses, like trash pickup every Monday morning and the repairs needed on my 1987 Saab. I live with five other girls, and a few of them are developing a strange habit of throwing the mail at me when they spot my name on an envelope in my father's brash and hurried penmanship. To them, it means a check to cover my bills, and they are jealous and they are right to feel so. But normally he also includes a comic strip about cats or an article about criminals who are gullible, and I post them on the refrigerator. Nearly every housemate chuckles while searching for the containers of leftover macaroni and

cheese, saying, “Your dad is so weird.” He is. He is a man prone to wit and sarcasm and he never calls me after nine o’clock at night, ever. He loves to get my roommates on the phone and talk to them about the latest documentary he saw, and he loves to tell them jokes. They all notice, though, that it seems my father has a great deal more free time to meet me for lunch or to call me about the news on Channel 13 than their own parents. I notice this, too.

August 2002

When I arrive in graduate school in Brockport, New York, about an hour away from my parents’ home, my father calls me and asks me to come home. I oblige. When I get there, he hands me a cell phone and explains.

“It’s mine, but I rarely use it, so I think you should finally have one, don’t you?”

I nod. “Thanks.”

“But, this is all we can do right now,” he says. My mom looks at me and smiles warmly. “I’m thinking of switching jobs, which might mean some different monetary concerns, because I’m thinking of starting my own business from home.”

I am not surprised; my father has complained about commuting into the office for years and has been taking more and more days off. I noticed it after holidays, when he lethargically heaved himself into the garage to start the car as snow whipped by him. And he hates cell phones, rarely uses one. I am grateful. When I leave late that afternoon, I put his phone in my glove box, nestled in old receipts and the driver’s manual.

March 2004

I start writing my Master’s thesis in my tiny, tin-box apartment with grimy windows that leak frosty air. I have been planning a camping vacation with friends for months, and this morning I am scheduled to leave for South Carolina. All I need to do is drop my cat Itty off at

my parents' house. When I get there, my father is in his pajamas, pacing. It is ten o'clock. Most people are at work. He should be, too; I had anticipated walking into an empty house. When I walk in, he avoids eye-contact and I notice that he's drinking soda, not coffee. He is also watching a re-run of a Chris Rock stand-up routine, but no one is laughing.

I take Itty upstairs into my old bedroom, and shut the door. I hear her petite mewls from underneath the trundle bed. As I turn, my father stands behind me in the small hallway. "I need to ask you something," he says and ushers me into the master bedroom.

"Your grandmother, my mother, well, she's getting old." I think of my grandmother; I have met her only once, when I was five. She lives in Minnesota and has never visited us. "Well," he continues, "she hasn't been paying taxes on her house, and she called me in a sort of frenzy yesterday afternoon when I was home. She doesn't want to move; she's seventy-five. But she wants to keep the house, so I wired her almost all the money I had in our checking account."

My eyes bulge.

"I haven't told your mother yet, but I was wondering if you could do me a favor?"

My conscience catches on this. Something feels odd. My mother doesn't know, which is bad. I swallow. "What is it?" I ask him.

"I need maybe just two-fifty, three-hundred bucks for the weekend. Then I can transfer money from my savings on Monday, and tell Mom."

I think about this. Finally, I agree, stating the parameter, "I'll do it, if you tell Mom." The fact of any family is that we try to love one another, and I love my grandmother, even if I haven't seen her in eighteen years. So I go to the bank, and my dad trails me and waits in the parking lot. I take out what is almost the remaining balance in my account; I have already taken money out

for the trip. I hand it to him in an envelope and he looks shaky. He drives away, but something is wrong.

On the drive down to the campsite, something nags at me and my friends. We wonder aloud about how this could happen, how my dad could just run out of money. Every night, when we crawl into the tent, instead of telling ghost stories, we theorize about why my dad hasn't told my mother any of this.

November 2004

Days before Thanksgiving, I start receiving messages from my father's bank, because a deep-throated loan officer thinks the cell phone I have is still my father's. He leaves two messages, both about a "refinancing plan." I call my father and leave two messages on the house phone for him, full with detail about the phone numbers to call and the text of each message. He does not call me back.

When I drive up my parents' driveway for Thanksgiving, my father runs outside in his t-shirt and sweater-vest, even though it's thirty-six degrees outside.

"Hi Samantha! I got your messages." He pauses and peers behind him at the large living-room window. "I'm refinancing the house as a surprise for mom, so don't say anything, okay?"

"Okay," I say as I pull out the wine I bought and hand it to him. "Ooh, this one's great – Australian shiraz is wonderful," he notes.

"I know," I say and wave to my mom in the window, "You told me that."

Inside, my mom hugs me and says, "Craig, what were you doing out there?" His arms are bubble-gum pink with cold.

"I wanted to see if Samantha needed any help," he replies, and slyly winks at me. I smile.

December 2004

The conscience is a funny thing. It is like a nagging grandmother, or the trash that is overflowing. I can see the problem; I just do not want to address it. Finally, not long after my father accosted me at Thanksgiving, I pay a visit to my mom at her office.

Dan comes along for the ride, and I drop him off at a coffee shop across from the Main Street insurance office where my mom works. I park and walk in, pushing gently on the clean glass door. The receptionist greets me, saying, "Just go on back, Sam. She's in there."

My mom looks surprised to see me. In fact, she looks weary. Her eyes are bloodshot, and she stands up behind her desk. "Samantha-what're you doing here?"

I sit down and put a jelly bean from her candy tray into my mouth. "Uh, well. Uh, this is hard for me, but I need to talk about Dad." I suck on the raspberry gelatin.

She sits down. She puts her head into her hands. "I know," she says, and my heart starts beating faster.

"Well, see," I say, trying to make things better, "someone from your bank keeps calling me, and Dad said it was because he was surprising you by refinancing the house?"

Her eyes widen. "Oh, Samantha." She sighs and puts her head back into her shaky hands. I stand up and close the door. The women in the office turn slightly to watch. I smile at them.

"He wasn't home when I got home last night," she tells me. "He didn't come home until about seven-thirty, which was weird, you know? So anyway, I hadn't started dinner yet, and he came in and sat down on a stool in the kitchen. He told me he had been driving around, that he was going to buy a gun, but he didn't." She stops to get her breath, "He said that instead, he was planning on driving off the overpass on 490, over Monroe Ave, but he couldn't do it. He said the only reason he didn't do it was because of you."

My mouth hangs loose.

“I guess he’s been like this for a long time...there’s so much, Samantha. So much. He hasn’t been working, either.”

I think for a minute about what I know. “He borrowed three hundred dollars from me,” I say. “He said he gave all your money to – ”

My mom interrupts me, “Oh, God. He’s got everything all messed up. Our bank accounts are frozen and they won’t let me authorize anything – he’s created passwords so I can’t access anything. It’s his drinking. Every night when I come home, he’s drunk. Every night.”

I look at my mom, and then at the jelly beans. They are perfectly oval, and shiny. “How long has it been this way? His drinking like this?” I ask.

She slumps down in her chair. “Seven years.”

When I collect Dan from the coffee shop, the look on my face must communicate shock, because people part in line for me to reach him. He springs up, and we get into the car before he asks me, “You want me to drive?” I shake my head. “So, how’d it go?”

The sun is setting in a mild, buttery way – spreading itself thick on the tops of cars, tracing the last autumn leaves. I pull onto a side street. I put the car back into first. I pull the emergency brake, and shut off the ignition. I weep.

December 25, 2004

Christmas Day. I find myself driving to my parents’ house. Earlier in the week, my mother told my father that she is leaving him and moving back to her family in New Hampshire. He insists that we have one last family Christmas, and Dan is kind enough to participate.

The pile of opened gifts underneath the tree is a heap of torn wrapping paper, some ribbons, and underpants. When it is almost over, I survey the items: a pot holder from my dad to

my mom, socks from my parents to Dan, lip gloss from my stocking, and a cat water bowl from my parents to Dan and me. My dad hands his final gift over to me. It is square and thin, like an album. For a moment, I get excited. I try to feign happiness as I tear the wrapping off. It is a calendar. "It's got great pictures," my dad says. "Yeah," I reply. There are twelve photos of Europe; each month contains factual information about the particular place photographed. "For all the places you've been, or should go," he says.

"Thanks, Dad."

He stands up and walks out of the room.

December 23, 2004

My mother slowly ventures into the basement while my father is out. She creeps down the steep wooden stairs carefully, and pulls on the light switch to illuminate the bottles of orange soda resting in cardboard boxes. She tentatively takes one bottle in her hands. It is store-bought and should be unopened, but it feels soft; it does not feel as taut as a new bottle of carbonated liquid should feel. She twists the ridged white cap off. The liquid does not fizzle or overflow. She sniffs: vodka. The bottle smells of vodka. My father, who promised new sobriety and virgin soda, has been making drinks under her nose.

November 2008

According to Charles Sell, author of *Helping Troubled Families: A Guide for Pastors, Counselors, and Supporters*, at least seventy-six million Americans have been exposed to alcoholism in their families. I believe it. I believe it because my grandfather did not die ice skating. My grandfather died in New Hampshire at the age of twenty-seven because his liver failed. My mother was six years old, awaiting the news in the Dartmouth Medical Hospital.

When I tell my mother that I intend to start therapy at the college to help me deal with Dad, she finally tells me the truth. My grandfather was an alcoholic. She says he was very popular. He was a high-functioning alcoholic. He stored cases of beer in his trunk. This leaves me with sand filtering through my fingers, the half-truths of what his life was like. I am left with the unmistakable fact that I am four times more likely to develop alcoholism than an individual who does not have alcoholism in her family. These words encapsulate themselves into the grains of sand and taunt me; they are stubborn and coarse.

February 2005

Alcoholics hide things. They hide receipts, alcohol, money, bottles, affairs, and emotions. The things my father hid are numerous, and came out slowly, like blowing out a fire and finding that underneath certain logs, the splinters are still fused, burning. Under one log, I found student loans he somehow took out in my name during the course of my undergraduate career. Under another log, I find the receipts to credit card purchases on an account that I never opened. Under a tiny flame of burning plastic, my mother finds home-equity loans, and refinancing information on their house. But under the big log burning with moss and rot, we find an abyss: three-hundred-thousand dollars in debt, a foreclosure on their home, and repossession of their two cars. Beyond that, we find a man shaking on the ground floor of his house, drawing the blinds in the daylight to avoid loan sharks, creditors who pound on the door, and delirium tremens.

January 3, 2005

When my mother moves out, it is a sunny day. Her family drives up in four separate cars and a full-sized moving van and shoves every last thing into it, including my father's filing cabinet full of his secrets. He begs us not to move it. I laugh at him and carry it down the stairs with my mother's best friend on the opposite end.

When everyone pulls away, down the long, straight two-lane road edged with snow and ice, my father turns to me. Water leaks from a hose where they have disconnected the refrigerator and ice-machine. He kicks a bucket underneath the leak.

“Well,” he says to me. “What do we do now?”

I take a bag full of coins, our family’s loose change, turn on my heels, and leave. That night, my father tries drinking himself to death. He scratches at *Win for Life* lottery tickets, and bumps into the walls. He calls me every hour to report that he is still alive. He sleeps his last night there on the hardwood floor of the living room, wrapped in a sleeping bag. My mother has taken the rug.

Late January 2005

My father moves into his mother’s house in Minnesota, where he sleeps in his old bedroom and drinks whiskey from the bottle. He harasses my mother and calls me late into the night, slurring into the phone.

Things that are false taste like steel in my mouth. My grandmother never needed money. In fact, as she writes in a letter to me, she added my father to her checking account in 1999 because he was broke. My father stopped paying federal taxes in 2001. He stopped working when he was fired in 1998.

March 2005

My father checks himself into rehab in Minneapolis. I speak to his psychiatrist while he is there, and my father mails me pictures of his room and the icy campus. In them, my father frames his bureau, full of old pictures he salvaged of me and my mother, our old dog. None of them contain him.

August 2007

My father calls from another rehab facility. This time, it's for bipolar disorder. He says he is manic depressive. He tells me it is a relief to finally know the truth. I sit at the kitchen island with my head in my hands. This is not a relief; it is a life-long illness that was explained away by alcoholism. Now, the hard work of sobriety is nothing against the hard work of a child with a manic-depressive father. He also tells me that he is addicted to Percocet. Then he hangs up.

September 25, 1968

My mother marries a bipolar alcoholic, and he is my father.

November 2008

My father decides to go into the coffee business when he is loosed into the world from rehab, and because he has met two men in Minnesota who own a coffee chain called "Two Brothers." He calls me up to tell me that he has to move to Peru to find "the newest target market" for coffee growers and coffee drinkers. For almost a decade, my father has been making up these stories, these lies that live in his head. Every time I try picturing him in Peru, in a coffee-bean field, the golden sun relentless on his small, narrow face, I start to laugh. He also tells me that he bought a new bicycle and he likes his new rental house. I agree to someday visit him there. When I do, I know enough to bring the coffee.

He tells me that I will love his dog and the color scheme of the house décor. He does have good taste. He says that everything in the house is either black or white, with a few red throw rugs that he found on sale. He tells me this with such conviction and enthusiasm that I can't help believing him, even though I know he lives in a world full of grey.

Things Checked on a Wish List

I. Raise my standard of living.

It was hot, the city was dust. Stray knives rusted gutters, a dog got loose, running alongside clunking cars. In the park across the street, the vendors argued, their low growls close to their throats. I lay down there, no one around, on a bed of budding buttercups.

II. Have long hair

Something to do with waves. The lake surged that summer, its water green silt, the weeds below the docks knocking against the fish. Blonde knots tangled in the sand, ponytails high and quick. In the night, tossing, white streaks, curls loosen while I sleep.

III. Quit smoking

On a wide winter street, drunk, I tugged at the filter with frozen lips, didn't inhale much, the snow two feet that night, all turning to thin ice. My lungs collapsed, rose, fell; the ice clung to the insides of all the windows.

IV. Levitate

At a slumber party, skinny, young, rock-candy teeth in all of us, the girls helped me up to the bare white ceiling and I touched it, they never dropped me, not even once, until the sun rose across all the backyards and their small arms got sore.

V. The unchecked things

Own a telescope, watch my father cry, feed a snake a mouse, swim to the deep end, help a child overcome shyness. The world rushes at me, its ten long fingers; the candle in my cortex extinguishes. Poof. Find my exact double. I feel her somewhere near, when I get up late, the sheets still on my skin, the air ripe. She resides in the drawers I never open, underneath the red skin of the last apple resting on the kitchen counter.

Vacancy

On the outskirts of London there is a beautiful school full of delinquent high-school students. To combat the risks and lures of city life, the students are shipped to this boarding school on acres of green, snowy field, lots that are usually empty. On this day, my college boyfriend J. has brought me here to show me where he went to high school until he was kicked out and sent to the States to live with his mother. He is unsure if he will be welcomed back, even now in his mid-twenties.

It is mid-afternoon and the halls are cold and lack even a lone student late to class. “Demerits if you’re late,” J. tells me as we skulk through the double-doors without facing security. He believes people will recognize him. Once a model, he is striking, but not for the reasons he thinks. He looks dangerous and greasy. We move down a flight of stairs and a man collides with us. J. recognizes him instantly. “Mr. Stanwick!” he says. “I’m J. S.! I’m visiting, from New York.” He doesn’t introduce me and it’s clear we’ve broken school policy; we should not be roaming the halls of a boarding school this freely. The man’s eyes are completely blank, vacant of any recollection of J. whatsoever. He tells us to get to the front, where we can sign in, and he moves along the empty hallway and back to his classroom.

In an unfilled pub across from the living quarters, J. tells me about Mr. Stanwick and the school. A group of students arrive with a teacher, and they pull out their books, filling the cold room with their laughter. J. eyes them suspiciously and drains his beer. We leave and then stand at the train station alone to get back into London proper.

“No one knew me. That teacher, in the pub, was my philosophy teacher. He once told me I had a mind for logic.”

J. muses to himself against the snow that is starting to fall. I start panicking, feeling completely alone. I do not know where we are, and it's getting dark, and J. is upset at all the vacant stares during this homecoming. He imagined it different, fuller. When the train finally comes, we are the only ones in the car. I start to wonder about J.'s truths; everything he has told me rings hollow about this place. I watch apartment lights turn on as we move into the city: pop pop pop of yellow and white. If I didn't feel so unoccupied or disengaged, the lights would be magical. Instead, I focus on all the voided rooms in the dark as we pass.

Vacancies are great dilemmas. They build and build, and finally one day they become stable, irresistible elements of our corporeal fabric. When I lived with J., my mind was vacant much of the time. When we met, he was just out of prison. He latched onto me; I was an unsuspecting creative writing TA in my final English class as an undergraduate. I read his poems and didn't particularly like them – there was a rigid violence to them all. Soon, he was doggedly pursuing me; I should have been on edge, but I was flattered. I was young, and looking to fill a gap left by my absent father. J. filled it for me, and it didn't take long for him to become overfull, dangerous, and damaging. I finished college, and I got into graduate school, but it was as if I turned my mind on and off as it flowed from unreal textbooks to the real, live tremulous undertaking of my horrible life weekend by weekend of drug use, hippies everywhere, and a manic, destabilizing home life.

We lived on a lake in a nearly vacant house that had a huge deck overlooking the waterfront. Most of the summer residents had left, inhabiting their own suburban lives once again, rubbing salve on their shoulders, and sighing a deep, reflective breath. I fled my family instead, running from their home into my criminal boyfriend's arms, severing me from safety.

J. and I occasionally traveled to London to visit his father and his step-mother, people with huge incomes and British accents. At Christmastime, every room was full, brimming with bright white lights, stockings hung next to misplaced mugs of eggnog, wine on every table. It was invigorating. Once, J.'s parents sent us to Ireland for a long weekend as a gift. We took the first plane out, learning the travel patterns of a foreign world.

On the plane, all I could see were jagged green edges of a gemmed country, an Ireland I had only dreamed about from books. When we reached Dublin proper, the light was musky, dim in the early evening. Everything was shaded. We found a deli that served tuna fish and egg in the same sandwich, so we sat and ate, swilling beers. When we stood to leave, we asked which way to Castleknock Road. The waiter laughed, pointing, and in a thick accent, said, "Oh, 'bout three miles that way." We had to cross the largest park in Dublin to get there, at rush hour. So, in the rain we trudged, barely speaking, each blaming the other for getting off the bus too early.

At dusk, we finally came upon a large house with a glassed-in, dark patio; the house was black. We pushed open the unlocked double-doors, feeling like robbers. Inside, at the front hall, two blonde women about my age greeted us as the expected guests that we were, and one, the elder, agreed to let us rent the room by the day; this was a luxury. But something was amiss. The father, who owned the house, was "quite immobile," and "a bit vacant," as his daughters put it. He had suffered a stroke and rarely left the living room. We did not see him when we arrived, and only later we saw him at a diagonal in his wing-backed chair, perched in front of the little fire. His two daughters ran the place and were soft, beautiful creatures. No one else, though, was staying with them, and they didn't make breakfast. Instead, every morning, the sisters ushered us off to the bus stop a half-mile down the road, which was stuffed with uniformed, freckled school children.

At night, we'd spread out a picnic dinner from what we had purchased during our day trips: chocolates, animal crackers, tartlets, and lots of tuna fish. We slurped Heinekens and listened to the teenaged girls laughing together as they ran the dishwasher. The walls looked thick behind their rose curtains and lace, but they were thin; once, another woman arrived, then left in the dark hours later. I assumed it to be their mother. The girls each took a nightly shower, and this we could also hear at a distance.

On our second night, we decided to walk to the local pub. It was full of old Irish men in caps. I loved it. J. drank too much, partaking in Irish whiskeys and pretending to connect with the neighborhood men. At close, we were still there. I was half-asleep, too drunk for me own good. On the walk back, J. stopped me in the street and pulled a pub glass from underneath his sweater. "J.!" I gasped, "why'd you take that?"

"It's a souvenir," he slurred. He expected me to be happier than I was. Upon seeing my worried face, he catapulted the empty glass on to the asphalt street. It shattered loudly. I jumped. "You whore," he said, something he was always saying. He picked up one of the longer shards, pointing it at me.

"J., no, stop, I'm sorry," I said, pleading. I had no idea what his plan was, but I knew it wasn't good. I felt alone on the street, and empty. I felt J. behind me, but I didn't turn. He threw the shard down next to my foot. "You worry too much," he said. "They have tons of glasses anyway. You ruined it." This was his entitled thinking; he was always taking things that weren't his because he believed people owed him something. I hoped someone missed me, overseas and alone. We trudged quietly into our large rented room, where J. collapsed on the bed, on top of the sheets. I slept on the floor.

On the third night, we decided there was something wrong. There was simply no one else here, and it felt as if we were squatters in the B & B owners' home. We resolved to sneak out the following morning on the creaky old staircase, slip out unnoticed, and be gone from this odd family. Instead, as we slipped halfway down the stairs with our travel pack, the father beckoned, emerging slowly but fiercely at the top of the stairs.

He asked us where we were going at five o'clock in the morning. I stopped short, ever a bad liar. "Um," I said just as J. spoke quickly, "You see, sir, I am quite homesick." His unfamiliar British accent was piercing, "I miss my father some, and we didn't want to disturb you at this early hour." The father came closer, eyeing us with his baggy eyes, "You'll pay for it, right?" We nodded, lying. The owner, standing before us, had our credit card number, along with J.'s father's phone number, at his disposal. We thought we could save by leaving unnoticed, not adding an additional day. "Well, sir, it's still early yet," J. said, and the man countered, "But you said you intended to stay for four days, maybe five." Now that was a lie. The pit of my stomach opened up and swallowed me whole. We nodded, moving as fast as possible, slipping past the heavy oak door, leaving the man on the stairwell with his sudden extra vacancy.

Outside, we ran to the bus, filled with glee at the freedom. We re-booked our plane tickets and arrived in London by mid-afternoon, drinking beers at a nearby pub before re-entering J.'s parents' house a day early. We decided to tell them the truth of the experience: it was just too creepy to stay.

We held pre-dinner glasses of white wine in our hands as we detailed our Dublin adventure for J.'s family. The only interruption was the phone ringing. J.'s father handed it to me, "It's the B-and-B. They say you left a bracelet there," he said, as trusting as a toddler. My nerves sliced through me. I don't wear much jewelry, certainly nothing valuable. The only jewel

I wore at the moment was a seashell tied with a string around my neck. I went into another room, then up the stairs to another level, as I paced and stared at the glossy covers of the British *Vogue*.

“Yes, Samantha?” I heard the familiar lilt and tug of the older daughter’s voice. I stayed silent. “Well, it seems we have a problem. Miss, after you left today, a package arrived from London for you; it was a book, and some pictures.” I nodded, my heart racing. Okay. Okay. “Miss, there were drugs in it.”

My mouth slipped open, and I gasped. I immediately knew what had happened: J. had shipped drugs to himself via the mail from London, thinking that we’d be in Ireland for the full four days. “Miss, we can do a few things here: press charges and talk to J.’s father there now, or we can flush these down the toilet for a full week’s rent. What’ll it be?”

By the look on my pale face, J. had guessed something wasn’t right, and took the phone from me as he guided me to the top level of the flat. On the staircase, I could hear his stepmother asking if everything was all right. I listened as J. authorized the immediate wiring of our last two hundred dollars to a blackmailer because my criminal boyfriend had once again committed a crime. The money went through. Afterwards, J. wiped sweat from his forehead and from underneath his turtleneck sweater, saying only, “Close one,” to me in the stairwell before we all sat down to a four-course meal. That night in bed, the only thing J. said to me was, “I bet they didn’t flush the drugs. I bet they took them.”

I was vacant for a great part of my relationship with J. I had become someone who simply and unequivocally wanted to get through a day without a fight, without witnessing an overdose or without furniture breaking. Usually, this tactic of passivity did not work out. My eyes, in the pictures from that time, look like the wintering lake: cold, with flashes of grey— open

pools of complete absence. In photographs, it's as if my eyes have waves and splash back a constant low tide.

Once, on a snowy morning of a new delivery job I took to bring in money while attending graduate school and bailing J. out time after time, I drove right by a woman in distress. I had just delivered flowers to a woman whose son was arriving home from the Army, wounded and on disability, she told me. The lilies were wilting in the suffocating cellophane. I told her to get them into water; I was absent and tired. The television blared in the huge living room, a fire was going in the stone fireplace. The normal things that I witnessed among deliveries caused so much nostalgia for my old life, replete even with my unhappy parents, that I almost quit my job. Instead, I checked out emotionally, became a hollowed-out shell of a person delivering good-will and cheer to middle-school guidance counselors, mothers at home with sick children, husbands surprising their wives. The colors of cheer, the deep reds, a myriad of pine and deep greens, leatherleaf points, white lilies, yellow stamens, orange sunflowers, were usually too much for me, and they were this stormy morning. When I closed the van door for the last time, I drove tentatively to the stop sign. I was headed for the icy main road. Right in front of me was a woman hunched over her steering wheel in a ditch next to the stop sign, her car running. I saw the engine smoke, her red hair that reminded me of my aunt, and her long fingers. But instead of registering the help she needed, I stopped at the stop sign in front of her vehicle that now I could see was totally off the road, and pulled a right into traffic when it was safe. Later, I drove back through for another delivery. I noted the swirl of the red and blue police lights at the same intersection. I focused my eyes on the blurry road, the white snow against resolute sunshine.

When I finally I got out of my relationship with J., the world returned to color. I stood on the deck in the bright cold while my parents retrieved my things from the lake- house we shared. It was riddled with J.'s last hurrah: cocaine on the dresser, white piles of it on the stove, burn marks, and whiskey puddles all along the rug. The lake water was ice-white and grey waves, and the herons in the distance were blue beacons; the sun shone in vast, wide swaths of yellow; my hair, I noticed, had returned to its light blonde shade.

Years later, I found myself in another B&B – this one in Enfield, New Hampshire, on the morning of my wedding. My husband-to-be and I had stayed the night together; we decided to buck tradition. Our families were kind and uncaring about this one small fact. The inn was brimming with people. Our hosts, a lovely elderly couple who owned the house, chose to sit with us at breakfast. I started to fret about the time and how many things we still had to do before the ceremony. The owner leaned into me and set down his drink. “Give each other a full life, and you’ll be okay,” he said quietly. His wife nodded. The garden lilies opened slowly, facing daylight, and each center was ripe with bright yellow stamens.

Ask for Nothing

I sat in front of the television on a Monday night. I leaned against the bed and pressed the on-button with my toe. In crystal-clear reds and blues was David Blaine, the street magician and stunt-man from Brooklyn, completely submerged in a bubble filled with water. He wore thick rubber gloves, and he breathed through an oxygen tube. The commentator quietly noted that there was a team of one-hundred-and-twenty-seven doctors and trainers to help him deal with liver failure, skin peels, lung collapses: he had been living like this for a week.

I recalled David Blaine as the man who stood on a pole in New York City for thirty-six hours, buried himself alive, encased himself in ice, and lived in a glass box over London that people threw eggs at and tried to knock off its platform as he fasted. I felt like an egg-thrower. “Is this really how he makes his living?” I asked my husband Dan. David was giving one of his personal trainers a hand signal; the crowd stood completely riveted.

Dan nodded. David was planning on trying to break a world record by holding his breath for nine minutes: at the time, the record was eight minutes, fifty-eight seconds. *His liver was failing*, I thought to myself. *Who in his right mind does this to himself?* I neglected to think about the reckless things I had done.

Years ago, I lived with J., a manic-depressive. J.’s father lived in Notting Hill, an affluent London neighborhood. During a winter visit, J. began the trip with a risky maneuver of getting drunk on the plane, and, to get revenge on a stewardess who had refused to serve him more alcohol, he threw a lit cigarette at the woman, and another at the engine on the tarmac as the passengers exited. He was chased by security. It took me an hour to locate him in the airport, and when I did, he was glowing from adrenaline. J. had also arranged for people to ship him

drugs from the States directly to his father's house – a new recklessness. His father eyed the FedEx packaging suspiciously as J. bounded to the third-floor guest room, urging me to follow. I did.

In London, J. took me to his old haunts in the ghetto, waving hello to corner dealers who were “old friends.” He took me to Rosmead Gardens, an exclusive park that allowed only specific residents entry. Each neighboring residence applied for one household key, which was given out by the Park Services as a prized possession. J.'s father had gotten one. J. stole it from its particular silver hook one afternoon. We were approached, but not arrested, when a police officer noticed J. smoking pot on an antique bench in the rain. It was the only time I was given celebrity treatment, and we were graciously released. I shook in the rain with a new sort of fright; J.'s mania was untreated, and knew no bounds.

In the Portobello Market region, we met up with his old friend Pierre, and the two of them went trolling for mushrooms in the crowded streets. I stayed in a club and watched people walk in moon boots. They returned high; I recall nothing else.

On our last night, J.'s father recommended that we try a posh, upscale bar/restaurant that he and his wife liked very much. Not wanting to seem unwilling, we went, though almost penniless. All week, J. had been pouring money into pubs. But rumor had it that Madonna frequented this place when she was in town; J.'s stepmother was in her yoga class. So, I found myself sitting on the red-velvet couches, the table up to my ears. I am a small girl, and felt so much smaller than J., than the wealthy, than the leering men at the bar. I gulped down an expensive glass of pinot grigio and observed to J. that we could afford only one drink each.

J. turned from me, and he moved to a back booth. I followed because I did not know what else to do. On the way, he ordered another Scotch on a tab he had apparently started. At the back

table, he spat out, “We’re not paying for this, Sam.” He hissed, “We duck and run; you see, they trust people in these places, and they think we’ll go for a smoke and be right back.”

I stared at him, completely lost. This arrogance and the risks he was taking were new. Not only were we in another country, but we were down the road from his father’s new life, new house, new family. The risk was too much. His father frequented this place; in fact he probably made his recommendation to try to civilize his manic, sick son.

“J., *no*,” I said, shaking. I knew what would come next if I disagreed with him. “We have to pay, and we have only about a hundred dollars in our account, and we need it for the trip home, the cab, you know. J., we have to go, now. Do not order one of those cigars. J., J. –” I whispered under my breath.

“J.” I said his name as a statement of rage. The barista returned with another Scotch, even though J.’s eyes were already bloodshot.

J. removed a cigar from his pocket and opened it with the dexterity of a drunk. I grabbed it. “No, J., you have to return it, and we have to go.” I started adding up our bar tab, and it was likely larger than our entire bank account. J. took a sip of his drink, put it down, and lunged at me. I was wearing a bulky jacket, and he took hold of the collar, shaking me, choking me until I could not breathe. He spat in my face before a neighboring man walking to the loo made a beeline for us.

“Whoa, there, everything okay?”

I searched the stranger’s face for a moment. J. would not let me go. He grabbed my arm and dug in with all his force, slurring, “Just fine, leave us alone, thanks.” I rose and tried to gather my purse as fast as I could. I ran through the narrow corridor, past the bar, into the street.

It was winter, and icy, but bright as only London can be amid white streetlights. I had no idea which way to go. I was submerged in wine and fear.

J. followed me out, raging, knocking into the brick wall on the sidewalk. “You bitch,” he swore. He came at me, running into cars’ sides. Finally, I made my way to the end of a side street and to the corner of a street I recognized, turning around quickly to see if J. was coming for me. He pointed at me, swung his arm back, and punched a long crack into the windshield of a parked BMW. No alarm sounded. Incredible. He moved onto the next car, kicking the side with his LL Bean reinforced boots, a Christmas present. He kicked out front headlights, denting hoods with his fist.

I had nowhere to go in a city where I knew only J. and his family. He had our cell phone. I resolved to get on the next flight home, back to upstate New York, away from him.

Somewhere, I derailed. I got lost again. Finally, I found a street I knew, and made it to his father’s front stoop. I sat on it in the cold for almost an hour, wondering why I had returned. I reasoned that I would tell his father everything in the morning, that I was not taking care of J. as everyone had hoped, and that J. was running, and ruining, my life. I was working out my speech when J. came sluggishly around the corner, dangling the key in his broken hand. There was blood down both of his arms.

He unlocked the front door, laughing. “Some night, huh?” I said nothing. At least we were inside where people could help me. As we lay in bed, side by side, in the upstairs guest room, J. joked, “Well, we didn’t have to pay. Ha!”

I rolled over, safe for the moment. I stayed that night because I didn’t know how to leave. J. often slid from severe mania into suicidal depression; I had watched my father do the same with the same helplessness in my own household. Any move away from J. that I made was

accompanied with suicidal threats. Like my father, J. threatened to kill himself if I abandoned him, and I knew this time would be no different. It only got worse. Just before this trip, he had put a knife to his neck.

In the morning, he would do the same, pleading with me to stay. He lurked in a deep, familiar suicidal darkness that I had simply come to regard as a prison of my own.

I watched as David Blaine neared the final moments of breathing before he had to submerge himself and hold his breath. The commentator noted that his skin was peeling off. David took huge, gulping breaths that looked a lot like fear to me. His breathing coach soothed him with breath techniques and positive feedback, “You’re doing great, David, you’re doing great.” I became incensed at David, at ABC for airing this, for publicizing the potential drowning of a thirty-two-year-old man for everyone to see. “Okay,” the breathing coach said, “get ready, ten seconds until your final breath, you’re doing fine, doing fine.” David’s mouth opened like a struggling fish’s and took in air. He dropped back into the water, and the clock started.

From the crowds at the event, one face shone with concern. “This,” the commentator’s voice said, “is David’s brother. He just graduated, actually, from NYU today.” *Today?* I was floored; of all the weeks for David to try his hand with death on national television, why should it be when his brother graduated from college? I would have rather watched the ceremony. *Nice job, Aaron*, I could hear David saying later, *but you know, I broke the record for holding my breath*. It reminded me of J., all these years later, when he sensed that I was growing apart from him, moving on with my life. Every time he threatened suicide, I would stay with him as he punched walls, drank, put drugs down his throat, or physically threatened me.

The trainer stood outside the orb of water talking to David even though David didn't move. At seven minutes, David started convulsing rapidly, bubbles rushing out his nose. The trainer got worried and sent in divers, who pushed him to the surface. His mouth went agape, his skin was ashen, and I had to look away. He was, at least, alive.

In the late afternoon, J. made an omelet. I thought about approaching his father as he read the dailies, but he made his separate way out of the flat. We were to leave the following morning, and when we checked flights, I thought briefly about an escape, but neglected it. *How would I get to the airport? Who would help me out of this?* I believed in this sick situation that I was tethered, J.'s only salvation, so I let go of the dream. On the way out the following morning, J.'s father handed him one thousand American dollars silently. J. must have asked him for it, but he certainly did not share it with me.

Back home, J.'s behavior worsened. Soon, he wasn't coming home at all, and when he did, he was breaking more furniture, and turning over our bed, braced only by his own madness. He was using considerable amounts of drugs. I sniffed the insides of plastic baggies that had been emptied after he left in the mornings.

Years later, David Blaine decided to pull the same stunt; he wanted to hold his breath for the world record, which had been reset at sixteen minutes, thirty-two seconds. I decided to watch it. It would be aired on *Oprah*. David's huge tub was brought in from New York, and a special set was made for the event. Unlike the last time, David would not live submerged in the water for a week, but would hold his breath for over seventeen minutes. I watched, wincing, as his body started to shake a bit underwater. Halfway through, David's heart rate, which should have been

dropping, stagnated. Many, including a doctor from his own medical team, were worried that he was very close to death. Audience members, myself included, sat in silence, paralyzed by abject fear. Finally, after seventeen minutes and four seconds, he emerged with the world record. And, I noted, nothing to show for it but a gasp.

In rare pictures from my time with J., my mother's face is full of anger and worry. The looks are confusing but permanent reminders of the fear that J. instilled in her. In one photo, my father looks as if he's lunging at J., my mother is wide-eyed and holding a tissue to her runny nose, and I am in the center of it all with my hands up, mediating. I remember the day: sunny, warm, spring-like. We were on our way to lunch; my parents wanted to be beside me as much as possible before J. uprooted me to Europe again, or out of the state.

On a fateful October night, J. finally pushed too far. He was performing for his own audience of women at a party we were throwing. It was a last hurrah before I moved out; we had broken up but I was still living with him until I could find my own place. J. threw a wooden, high-backed chair from our dining room through a second-story window, strewing glass onto the heads of people outside. He ran at me, fully lost in his mania. A friend shuttled me away in his van, and J. followed fast in my car. He found us driving on the main dirt road that led into town; J. ran the stop sign, hit a pickup truck, and tried to hit the passenger side of the van in which I sat. He narrowly missed me.

My friend pulled his van to the side of the road in the pre-dawn darkness. J. appeared at the passenger side door, bleeding from his face and side. In shock, I stared at him. He had just attempted to kill me. He spoke, "What do I do now?"

Just as I opened my mouth to speak, my friend came around the car and pulled J. away, shoving him toward the wreckage of the car in the ditch. The pickup truck had fled; maybe it had been a college student drunk on the road. I watched as J. got into my car. *My car*. Months earlier, in a last-ditch effort to make our relationship work, J. had devised a plan to buy a new car, one that didn't often break down. Except that when his credit check came back, he had failed miserably. Instead of feeling worried, I let him bully me into signing my name over with my good credit, and the car loan was accepted.

Now, as he tried to start it, it revved. He drove it down a steep hill before I could wonder that he was capable of next.

My friend and I arrived at his home. I shook uncontrollably. An hour later, drunk to the point of being poisoned, J. burst through the doors, wielding a hammer he found in the open garage on the way in, coming for me. My friend and his family called the police and barred the door of the master bedroom, where I was cowering. J. barged in, and I ran out past him. He was unsteady on his feet. In the hallway, police were running to catch him, and one gathered me up by the arm and led me to the back of the police car sitting in the drive. Once I was settled in the locked, safe backseat, he turned to me. "You can never go back to him," he said.

He handed me forms to sign, and asked if I wanted a restraining order. I started to cry; this terrible relationship was finally public. I didn't know what to do. I cried and nodded yes. I signed it, and the charges against J.; he had ditched the ruined car in the lake and reported it missing. As I signed the forms, J. was escorted to the police car behind mine. He was handcuffed, but that didn't stop him from spitting at my window as he passed. The officer in my car turned to me as I winced. "You're my daughter's age," he said. "You must never, ever go back to him. You have to get out of this. You are better than this and you do not deserve this.

Use your support system now, and let them help you. You cannot do this alone, and they already know, by my guess, that he's dangerous. Let us take care of him for you; don't ever try to reach him again."

My husband and I watched with loose attention as David Blaine re-emerged on ABC for his latest stunt; he hung upside down for sixty hours and would now complete a "Dive of Death" in front of his audience. I watched as they righted him from his upside-down contraption; apparently he could have gone blind. "He already has!" I quipped to Dan, who didn't laugh. David seemed agitated and confused. There were too many commercial breaks for suspense. I lost interest and started reading, until they lifted David above the crowd, up to a forty-four-foot-high platform in the dark. Up on his ledge, he waved to the crowd and tried, unsuccessfully, to toss his hat casually to a woman below him. He was shaky on his feet, and his face looked swollen. "There's no way he's going to do this," I said to Dan, who shook his head. "Nope," he said, and went back to his own book. Finally, the crowd and David prepared for the dive of death. David looked down fast, then leapt from the solid platform, and floated into the air on a bungee cord. His feet barely touched the ground, and people booed. Suddenly, David's cord raised him up, and the cameras panned to the thick, black sky above and surrounding him. He was quickly absorbed into the night, loosed to the darkness. He had gone invisible. The New York City crowd booed and hissed. Dan looked up, and I clapped. "There he goes," I said to Dan, smiling. "He's finally gone."

The last night I saw J., he showed up at a friend's house. I was still living with a sharp fear of him; he had vanished but I felt him lurking. My friends and I were watching television

when J. came through the garage door; one of us had forgotten to lock it. J. was stumbling; someone had driven J. here, duped into a false reunion. J. swayed from side to side, coming for me. It was late evening.

When I escorted J. back out through the garage, he turned to me a final time, muddling through his drunken stupor. I stared hard at his back and the steel-toed boots that clunked over the cement in the tidy garage. As he swayed into the black night, he disappeared. He was swallowed first by the gaining distance when the car drove down the long drive. It was the last time I would see him. I watched the red brake lights fade into the dark as he went. Finally, there was simply blackness, a dark invisibility and the faint but secure promise of no return.

Return

This afternoon, before moving on, I stare at the herons. They feed easily, unaware of people watching, the wind working at knocking their fragile bodies forward. Inside, my parents pack up all my things. They pile clothes into a suitcase they bought for me when they were convinced of my ability to live. They work like ants. A policeman stands vigil at the door in case you come back, because days ago you tried to kill me.

In the bleak afternoon sun, I wonder what to do next. Watch these birds, I guess. Play with my long, unwashed hair. Look out for you to return, feel your voice echo along the lake, your long legs moving underneath another sky.

The policeman is restless on the phone, likely telling his wife about this fucked-up family; the daughter so helpless her parents had to move her out. You never return. You have already amassed all the gifts I gave to you in the center of the living room, a bonfire that could ignite by the simplest breath.

My mom says it's time to go. On the deck, I nod. I wish her far away. The herons collect and fly. I push my face into her coat; its downy warmth is good. Her arms flutter around me, my small frame, my bony life.

Girl with Cat

I. *“Zoos are full, prisons are overflowing... oh my, how the world still dearly loves a cage”* – Maude, from *Harold and Maude*

Children without siblings and the elderly make good pet-owners, and I am among them. As an only child, I was often lonely. Our house sat squarely on an abandoned cul-de-sac for years before a developer built three surrounding houses on the edges of the worn-down and eroded circle. We lived next to the Erie Canal and the railroad tracks, isolated from the neighborhood that I could see from my bedroom window.

When my parents fought, I held on tightly to my stuffed kitties, pushing their plush white fur into my face to quell my heavy, anxious breathing. I worried that my mom would leave, stranding me with my unstable father. Often, after a fight, my mom would go to bed in the room next to mine, and after a bottle or two of wine, my father would push his way up the stairs, hovering at my door. He never entered, but stood at the edge for minutes, listening for my breath. At first, this happened when I was about five, just on the verge of kindergarten. Maybe it was his trepidation about me entering the larger, less controlled outside world, with predators lurking, but if he heard me breathing too quickly, he would yell, “Go to sleep!” and my mom would rise, leading him to the bathroom. I learned, therefore, at a very early age, that we breathe slower and lighter when we sleep; tufts of air on the pillow. I would slow my breath, hug my favorite stuffed kitten Fluffs, and wait for my father to leave. Sure enough, he would amble back downstairs, loose with booze and fury. Most mornings, I awoke with a mouth full of white, fake Persian kitty hair, Fluffs tucked so tightly in my arms that his pink collar left deep marks in my skin.

I wanted a real cat more than anything else on earth, and asked for one each Christmas, as well as for an older brother. Each holiday, I got another stuffed feline instead, Garfields and blue-eyed Persians, calendars with pictures of small kittens in barns. I also received a lecture

from my mother, her voice wavering, explaining that I could not, in fact, have an older brother; it just wasn't possible. It was, I reasoned, with adoption. I was trying mightily to fill this void with wishes for a kitten, a living creature to nurture me and help me when I was scared.

My father, finally sick of my animal requests, brought home a Shetland Sheepdog when I was seven. I wanted to name her Cat, but my parents wouldn't let me, so I named her what she looked like instead: Lassie. I figured she could save me in her small way. She had floppy tulip ears that creased into soft folds of cartilage and fur, and she ate all the moldings off the doors immediately. At night, she moaned and cried, sad to be away from her brothers and sisters. My juvenile heart hurt for her, and my mother often found me in the laundry room, curled up with her on old blankets.

One night, Lassie ate some wood off the front door frames as my mother prepared dinner. My father returned home from work in a crisp blue suit, walked through the garage door and the hallway, and spotted Lassie's handiwork immediately. He poured himself a bourbon and water, and said hi to my mother. Lassie waggled at his feet, nudging his pant leg with her long collie snout, and he swung back his leg, aimed, and methodically kicked her across the kitchen floor. She slid on her side, yelping. The sound of a hurt animal was more than I could bear, and I ran to her, sobbing. Lass pulled herself up, bounded the stairs to her favorite step, halfway up, and we sat there, my tiny arms around her neck. I thought she would die from the kick, and my heart ached like fire.

Even though Lassie had room to run in our watery lawn, I was handed the responsibility of calmly walking her around the property when I got home from school. I came home each day to an empty house, and pulled the leash onto the neck of her frenetic jumping body. Because my father, in his waxing alcoholism and mental disease, was developing a severe sense of paranoia,

he left each morning for work with specific instructions for me: *Do not leave the front lawn, do not walk on the canal, do not go to the top of the hill behind our house, wipe Lassie's paws with a damp towel so there's no mud in the house.* I obeyed, thinking we were being spied on, and I darted fast between the shrubs and small trees in case someone was coming to attack me. I had a vivid imagination, and normally begged Lassie to hurry up with her business.

Inside, I locked myself tightly into our boxy house, plucked three perfect Oreos from their packaging, put them in a wooden bowl, and followed Lassie to the stairs, where we sat as I told her about my day at school. My fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Mahon, told us that animals understood us and empathized with our feelings, and I knew she was right. I told Lassie about my friends and whom I wanted to sit next to on the bus, and I told her about my good grades, and which ballet number I liked best in the production of *The Nutcracker* that I was practicing for every night at our local dance studio down the road. Lassie listened intently, though she often drooled or fell asleep. I didn't mind.

II. *If they [animals] are not given enough attention, [they] may die from the stress of loneliness.*

– People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)

In 2003, a New Jersey resident kept twenty-four grown tigers in her home. A cougar, starved without enough proper nutrients, was found in a basement in Buffalo, completely crippled, his legs severely underdeveloped. The resident claimed that she had taken the cougar in as a baby, and had kept him for company. Antoine Yates, a New York City resident, kept a grown tiger in his small city apartment. One day, the animal bit him in the arm so badly that he raced to the hospital and claimed the wound was from a rabid pit bull. When authorities arrived at his apartment, not only did a full-grown Bengal tiger lurch at them through the glass window,

but an eight-foot alligator emerged from a heap of dirty laundry. Exotic pets are often the most solitary and confined, and without proper care, they may, and do, perish from being so severely alone. Their captivity is usually a desperate illustration of human need for companionship, despite the obvious risks they pose. It was this philosophy that would lead me into strange men's arms, curiously moving towards danger. I was searching out a cat, a pet, an unconditional love. I was so eager to find it that I compensated by taking in strays, accepting dangerous flaws, feeding fury.

III. Helping animals is not any more or less important than helping human beings [...] Animal suffering and human suffering are interconnected[...] When given the choice, it makes sense to choose compassion –PETA

In college, I joined a group called the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA; most people know them for their smear campaigns at runways; they toss red paint onto models wearing minks. I decided to join because I was dating a vegan. We were protesting the local town's Burger King; the college Peta-ites discovered that their chickens were being caged inhumanely, and chickens' feet were growing out of their cages and getting stuck in the cage wires underneath them, binding all the chickens together before slaughter. Knowing nothing about protesting or being extroverted, I took a sign that had a pig on it that said "Porky Has a Heart. Do You?" I stood on the side of the main drag in Geneseo, New York. All twelve members congregated in front of the bright restaurant. A manager asked us to leave, but the president of our chapter refused. Cars drove by full of middle fingers; Geneseo was rural, smoky, and barbequed. After about an hour, I stopped chanting and just stood there. I couldn't even really visualize what a chicken dressed for slaughter looked like. While I protested, a long white car slowed down. I saw the passenger door open slightly and close. I looked at the driver and the passenger: two men sat wearing coveralls without shirts. One looked at us, took the rock he had

plucked from the road side, and threw it directly at me. It hit me, hard, in the left shoulder.

Stunned, I was pushed back a few feet. With my mouth open, the men's laughter howled across the dry grass; I walked to my car. *Animals*, I thought. *What animals.*

After college, I moved into a small communal lake-house in upstate New York. The house sat directly on the lake, and the ten of us that lived there planted a large garden and sat on the back deck every night, munching homemade guacamole and watching the sun set. It would have been ideal, except that I was living with J., who was recently out of prison and dangerous. Like a caged animal, if he felt constrained in any way, he lunged at me.

Over the course of two icy weeks in late October, I heard consistent mewing on the back deck, though I was unable to trace the source. I had seen a white-and-grey mottled cat with three legs hobbling nearby, so I had been putting open cans of tuna fish on the cold brick. Finally, one afternoon, a bluish-grey kitten crawled out from underneath an overturned canoe, and with rain dripping off her mangled fur, she came to the porch wailing. I held out my hand to her, and she licked it with a tiny pink tongue. I scooped her up, took her inside, and wrapped her into a blanket. She huddled for hours, shivering. I set out cat food, and this kitten ate a full bowl in one sitting, as if it would disappear if it wasn't consumed. She had tiny bugs crawling in her ears and cried at night like Lassie had. Finally, after a week, she let me pick her up and haul her to the vet.

I named her Itty Bitty Kitty, and we forged a friendship. She managed to survive her first vaccines and the de-worming process, and I survived J.'s fierce attacks. Each month, we worked on touching. First, I could pet her head; then, I could touch her back, and finally, her stomach, the ultimate trust. Soon, after J. would pass out drunk on the couch, Itty would climb the stairs and settle underneath my chin in bed, nestling. We listened to the quieting waves; she never once

mewed at the window, never once begged to go back outside. She was my saving grace, a ray of grey hope in my tentative life.

After J. tried to kill me, I got an apartment of my own with Itty. Though J. had emptied my savings and checking accounts, he did not know where to find me. I dyed my hair a chestnut brown, and Itty still recognized me. With our fifteen dollars, I purchased litter, tuna fish, and cat food. The tuna was for both of us, and we ate it dry. Our freedom was exhilarating in the tiny apartment, and I studied at night by the front, leaky window. Itty mewed each time she woke up to change sleeping positions in her afghan, as if she was afraid to be alone. When I woke after a nightmarish dream, afraid J. was at the window, I reached immediately for Itty, and normally I found her beneath my chin, or on the other pillow, purring in the dark.

For support, my close friend Joanna came over most afternoons, and once she brought over a Play Mobile set called "Girl with Cat." The figures were a small blonde girl in yellow pants and an even smaller grey kitty in a regal sitting position; it was me and Itty. I placed them on my low bookshelf, and Itty stared at Cat for hours. Finally, one morning in the early spring, Itty batted Cat until she fell from the shelf. I watched, keeping myself from reprimanding her as she took Cat into her mouth and ran into the closet. Though I searched, I couldn't find Cat. Most mornings after that, when I woke to go running or to make coffee, I would stare at Girl. She so quickly became "Girl Needs Cat." Her eyes were green like mine, and she had a permanent smile painted across her face. I could see directly into her plastic heart. She was lonely. Though my graduate work made those early months more bearable, Itty was what reduced my loneliness. Even when my parents called, concerned and a few towns away, I told them not to visit. I couldn't stomach another pub sandwich with my father at noon; normally, his sandwich was an amber ale. I preferred sitting in the window with Itty, reading letters from friends and textbook

chapters, watching her face turn to me in the dusk, both of us quiet, generous, unable to hurt one another.

*IV. Lisa Simpson: 'Do we have any food that wasn't brutally slaughtered?'
Homer Simpson, her father: 'Well, I think the veal died of loneliness.'*

- *The Simpsons* television series

When I met the man who would become my husband, I introduced Itty to him almost as my daughter. I was unable even to get through the story of J.'s destruction without breaking into tears, so I told it through the lens of Itty. She was the one, I put it, who walked through the glass shards, and she was the one who saw the chair fly through the window during his last manic episode of my life; Itty was the one with the hollow heart and the basic fear of humanity. "Itty's very important to me," I told him. He nodded, trying not to sneeze. My apartment was tiny, and he had rented a room across town to start graduate school. I had met him in one of our training sessions as new tutors.

"This is Dan," I said to Itty, kneeling on the floor. She distrusted new people, and had grown accustomed to running from them. She walked toward him, her tail in the air, confident. "Hi," Dan said, and got down on all fours. He put his freckled hand out and Itty sniffed it. Then she turned abruptly and tore into the bathroom, where she hid in the shower.

I reasoned that since she didn't hiss or wail, we were going to be okay. Even though Dan was allergic to cats, I fell in love with him. Soon, with Itty asleep in his lap one afternoon, we decided to get another cat. A fellow tutor's cat had a litter on her family farm, and she was giving the kittens away. Without much deliberation, we picked one up, delivering a bunch of wildflowers in exchange for a fluffy "cat ball," as Dan called him.

He was orange and white, and we named him Cow. I wanted him to become best friends with Itty, like brother and sister. He slept all the time, and Itty hissed continuously at him for hours through the bedroom door; we had to keep them separated. When he was old enough, he tottered into the living room, sun beaming on his tufty head. He climbed, painstakingly, into Itty's favorite chair. Finally, one afternoon, Itty turned to Cow and licked his head. I burst into tears. "Look," I said to Dan, pointing. "They love each other. Itty's not sad anymore." The world, it seemed, was spinning on a favorable axis; for the first time in years, my heart flourished from the impact of a human touch.

On a cross-country move to the Midwest, my father, out of another rehabilitation center, helped me and Dan pack up our car and moving van. It was his first sober visit with me in years. Before he helped with the dismantling of our bed, he snapped pictures, one of his revisited hobbies; he caught Cow licking Itty's face, Cow hunting sunbeams, Cow with beer caps in his mouth from a going-away party the night before. Peering underneath our bed, my dad held up a small grey figurine. "Uh, Samantha?" he asked, "Do you need this?" It was Cat.

"Yeah, I do." I said. I put Cat in my purse with Girl, reuniting them in blissful harmony, though by now they had grown accustomed to being far apart.

In Kansas, we have a long deck that is built from wooden slats, and we've planted flowers and some pepper plants in rectangular tubs. The cats beg to go outside nearly every morning; they paw and mew even when there's rain, and often we let them loose. I like to watch them leave the same sliding glass door and separate. Itty heads for our bedroom window and leans on it while lying down. Cow tugs at the plants, retrieving scattered leaves and running them

inside, placing them in our shoes. When I try to stop him from doing this, he bites me; it's a reminder not to get too close; he is, in fact, an animal. Like a wave lapping as a lake quiets, I experience my own un-caging – I undo, day by day, my own stress of loneliness.

Before

If you put me back in New York, I would chew my fingernails and eat my own lips.

I would gaze at the steep college hill. I would revisit the seminar room where I barely ever spoke. I would light a fire in the wood-burning stove on the first floor of our house and I would not move out. I would watch silly sitcoms and eat more macaroni and cheese, and I would drink rum and coke with a straw and pick up a killer coffee habit.

I would watch myself and my swinging ponytail prance down the street in tights and leotard, ribs and bones. I would watch as I smoked and puffed and choked, and I would wince at whose bodies I was under. I would step across the room to see my sallow face, concave and lonely.

I would eat my weight in potato chips. I would bask in a size six. I would hang my feet from car windows and tell professors what I actually thought. I would re-read everything. I would stay out of bars. I would stop taking drugs, I would talk about a future with words, I would remove my makeup, I would stop running, I would eat out more and stab the cherry tomatoes with my thick fork tines, savoring every single crimson moment.

Section Two
Color Schemes.

Lavender

My luggage rests across my feet, its contents a mass of cotton tees and loose skirts, Parisian sneakers, the tread square and worn. Fog skims the earth outside; sunbeams shoot through my amber ale, warm. Mothers kiss men goodbye and turn their babies from the rails, avoiding the iron echo of this station. Flowers wilt in thin pastels; no one handles them. Instead, people read news and speak to one another in low, dim French with lavender accents. My train is called to board. It slides to a stop as if snow were on the rails, as if the New York weather where I am headed has already leapt from my bags to ice everything over. I leave the last of my beer covered in spit and worry. Up close, the tracks are oily. From my seat by the window, a landscape collides with a yellow afternoon, and all I see are soft hills, racing fields, blue possibility tight in my palm.

Definitions: A Historical Approach

Frippery: n. The clothing that I wear. The clothing that *we* wear. The clothing that is sold at the VOA in Brockport on a rainy yet dreadfully sunny day, crisp lines of strict sunbeam slanted across the pleated, outdated skirts, those pants the dressmaker once touched with golden fingers, flush with opportunity. We are graduate students, armed with nothing but books and wine. Dan slowly traces the holes in the pairs of pants, stuffs his fingers into them, wonders if he should take them for five bucks even. This place is where memories ache with lace burden, tremble with woolen recollection, flashes of business lunches and meetings downtown, kitchen wallpaper we have never seen, all these clothes in our young hands; the register barely manages all the plans we have with them.

Looking-glass: adj. My looking-glass self refigures my skinny image after I eat these French fries. I panic, look around. My looking-glass self imagines I am obese, licking the pig fat from the bone leftover, my looking-glass self hinged on the hanger with the black bodice dress, slinky and a dream – I am at a fraternity formal, it is snowing. My looking-glass self, imagined in black, imagined in silk, imagined in tiny dots of dizzy starvation, my looking-glass self a ghost in this window, the snow grey and loose around my looking-glass hips.

Malapropism: n. “I am so incredibly kidnapped by your love!” I said to him, nervously, so calm and surprised and unreliable. His eyes gleamed like topaz squares, rubies in his Irish head, the freckles diseased and moving. “I wish I knew the future of that day, long ago!” I said underneath a sky bright with orange storm, the clouds stagnating in the offensive flurry of our new hearts, lively, fueling heat between us. “Our love,” I asked, menacingly, “is like this chicken wing,

greasy and unspoken,” and I held up the bony structure, boneless and chill, hot and spicy, mild and molded, clucking at how soft this new love was.

Photograph: v. When he photographed me, I was wedded to him. When he photographed me, I was wearing white. When he photographed me, I was on the green lawn, shivering in the hilly shadow of afternoon, the elm tree chill. When he photographed me, I was smiling, bright. When he photographed me, I was his bride and his joy. When he photographed me, I noticed and posed. When he photographed me, the air clasped my hand, the lake smoothed its surface, the layers of cake bent upon their morsels; when he photographed me, he and I were wed.

Pumpkin: n. My father buys a pumpkin for my seventh Halloween. He buys one that is perfectly round, carrot orange in its entire circumference. In the small kitchen, in our new cul-de-sac house, my father encourages me to cut through the gourd, to raise my stiff, scared elbow and “get right in there.” With my orange pumpkin-knife, I slice through the layers, thick, and hit the slimy seeds. They seethe with anger, being so exposed. He pops the top off, lifts me up, lets me peer directly in; the orb is pulse and the orb is fresh. It is a field circumnavigating its way through One Knapps Circle. We plunge our hands, grasp at pulp, grind our teeth, until the world inside is flat and empty, void. Inside, later, he will light a tiny candle, and it will flicker, but the light inside will never be the same.

Vulture: n. On the side of the road sits a bird, bigger than I expected. His eyes are red and burning. His lips ache with prey. In front of him, beyond the pebbly black claws, a skunk, decaying each day on our nightly walk home, the stench a high level of rot and dirt, a sequential step in the cycle. Photographed, the vulture would say, “I mean business,” or, “I eat this now,”

but mostly, “I own this.” He owns the lawn, where, just beyond, a tidy sorority house stands with pink banners, held with wire and bow. A bird: an animal. Diclofenac will kill him before it kills cows; he ingests anything that can possibly decay. A systematic reconciliation with the world: a mercy, someone to remove the messy evidence of plausible suffering. We keep walking, but the next night, we take a different path.

Knife: v. When my father called, far away from me, a plane ride away over lakes in the Minnesota landscape, across icy fields, his suicidal high notes took over most of the conversation. My voice couldn’t rise over the diagnosis, the incessant declarative bang of a mental disease, as big as any crevasse after someone has fallen through. His voice spliced each careful, sliced syllable, dicing and knifing through *threat*, *myself*, and *mania*, cuts as dewy red as watermelon on a July Monday morning. Knifed and diced, his entire history, something cutting bone, something black and alien, coarse and dense. Immediately, he knifed through me.

Blunt: adj. My mother had naturally blonde hair, naturally great big blue-green eyes; naturally she said things like, “If you have nothing nice to say, say nothing at all.” At night, she wrapped her delicate pearl fingers around a crisp gin, a crisp tonic, condensation glowering in the dusk. To my father, at night, the real lessons: “Go to hell,” and “You asshole,” and “I hate you.” Her perfect blunt hair swung to the left. These signatures, like graffiti on a cold stone wall, blunt and slick with worry, almost but not quite right.

Blunt: n. and adj. The night: thick. The car: smoke. The day: gone. Wu-Tang blaring in the backseat, the seats rumbling, a man I think I love, from college, from this town I visit him in,

from the streets sliding by, a blunt in two small hands, brown, disheveled, strong. The drug fits between my lips, caresses the lengths of time between here and there, between mom and dad, between girl and boy. The street lights flaunt sober joy, careful purpose, direction. In quietude, later, I know I do not love him, I know I cannot love him, I know I cannot say it, I know I cannot say it, I know I do not love him; I do not know how to be blunt.

Magnificent: adj. My father walked the dog on the canal path in winter. The trees nestled on the eroding edges; the soft pallid snow rested on the branches. The dog's feet made a path in the snow. The trees sometimes made an arch, and he would stop. He put his hands behind his back, acquitting something like guilt for these small, cold moments. The dog would walk far from him, sunspots colliding on her back and her paws. Her ears flapped a dense, sensible brown, loyal to gravity. She got far away each time; his brown eyes would flicker, and panic, the trees a mess of nuisance, a blip in the line of sight. He would call her name, and she would come. The sun would converge on the tops of their heads, the precise hue of the dirt underfoot. Their steps were evident in the bedded snow, narrowing in the gaining distance.

On Place: The Essence of Movement

The purpose of the plié is to keep moving. Pam, my ballet teacher, demonstrates the bend of the knees as her arm arcs down, and then her legs straighten in one fluid motion at the white barre in the center of the room. I am tugging absently at my pink tights, adjusting the strap of my black leotard. When the music begins, I pull everything in, each muscle and tendon, each ligament flexed and taut, and I move my arm in constant, fluid circles as I bend to the ground but do not stop the rhythm of my body, the constancy of the exercise, the movement itself. At fourteen, I find the technique of traditional ballet challenging. “Keep it moving,” she always shouts above the hair piled tight on top of our heads, as we bend and straighten. She walks around the room as if she, herself, cannot stop moving, until the first exercise is finished. Pam, with her tiny waist and beautiful arches, emphasizes that the ballerina must always keep moving.

During the rond de jambes, she stops the piano abruptly halfway through and screams, “You must always be circling, the foot must never stop, do *not* wait for the music.” When the music resumes, I try harder. I use the space of the music and the floor to keep my foot circling, to keep my leg lifting in the air during grand battements, to pick the leg up as soon as it touches the floor. Pam, standing in front of me, watches intently as I simply keep moving. She finally nods and says, “Good,” and moves to the next student. It is at this moment that I develop a passion for movement; the idea of it is alluring, curious. It will not be until later that I will struggle with the transience of moving, always somehow searching for a place to finally stop, catch my breath, let my muscles rest.

The morning is sweating, the heat bubbling off the pavement and loose rocks in the long driveway. I am carrying a box full of clothing, t-shirts draped over the sides. The lake is busy with people, and the sound of boats is constant. I am moving into 5525 Cottonwood Drive, a

two-bedroom apartment, split with an identical one on the other side of the same structure; it is a trailer, really, that has been redone. Since graduating from college, I have been looking forward to this. I can see the lake from the living-room window, and I watch the water move as I bring in armloads of things, tank tops, my boyfriend J.'s weights, an Ansel Adams photograph. J. and I will live here with the agreement that the owners will be renting it out to a family for two weeks in July; for two non-consecutive weeks we will need to find somewhere else to live. But, for now, I am simply enthralled with moving in, creating a place of my own. J. walks around me, drinking bottles of beer that sweat in his hand, as I push socks into drawers, fold his bulky sweaters. Since my parents have stopped talking to me, we are moving without their usual help. They live an hour away, but at my graduation ceremony, they disclosed to me their plans to refuse to see me and J. together; J. had recently punched a hole in my bedroom door.

The first week in July comes fast; we will have to leave to allow the other renters to move into our home for their vacation. I am overwhelmed with irrational hatred for them, selfish as I am since we are renters, too. J. and I have been working at the local marina for the summer, and I have grown accustomed to coming home for lunch and eating on the dock, or at the small kitchen table. We will have to put all of our things in one closet, and lock it, when the family comes tomorrow.

That evening we make some calls to find a place to stay. We drive to our friend's basement apartment, which is a mass of darkness. We sleep in our friend's empty bed, and it is so dark that I don't see the alarm blinking at six-forty-eight in the morning. I put my bathing suit on under my clothes, deciding to bathe in the lake before work. I pull my toothbrush from my bag. I can't find things I need, like rubber bands for my hair. I go to work and repeat this ritual for three days. In between, at dusk, my friends, J., and I play soccer in the green fields across the

street, and we make vegetarian tacos. We burn old furniture in a bonfire that draws the neighbors over. All of it feels juvenile, like an overextended sleep-over, as if my mother has forgotten to come get me. When we pull out of the pitted dirt driveway on the last morning of our stay, our destination is not home but a state park and a tent.

“This is ridiculous,” I say to J., and look around me. After a long, ten-hour day of pumping gasoline and cleaning boats, I am exhausted from J.’s need for what he calls adventure. I need a roof, a bed, some shelter, but he doesn’t listen. All this moving is making me anxious, and when I express anxiety, J. drinks more heavily. I am facing the fact that I am homeless, without a place to sleep but a meager tent, a tent with a rip in its side. I am drinking Busch beer out of a can and I can hear crickets nearby. I forage for firewood; there is none. I manage to find kindling and I start fuming. “I mean, seriously, this is nuts,” I tell J., who is smoking. He shrugs and spits. “Grow up,” he says and flicks his ash into the fire pit. “It’s not life or death, you know.” His hair shakes in the slight breeze, his eyes very narrow. I gasp, say, “J.! Come on, we’re in the middle of a work week. What were we thinking?” He shrugs again, and looks up at the sky. “It’s not that hard,” he says, and snorts at the pile of branches in my arms. I dump the kindling down and watch as he tears sheets of an old communication studies textbook he found in the trunk, and crumples them, lights them on fire. They rush to burn. I finish my beer and watch his face in the fire. Then I crawl into the tent, sweaty and unshowered. I can hear J. rolling a cigarette, the tongue on the paper, a thin clean line. I hear him belch, breathe, and walk to stoke the fire.

Finally, we return to our rented lake-house. It feels nice to be settled, even though J. and I fight like dogs. I am stressed about having to leave for another week in late July, and I want badly to call my parents. But, since I am with J., I can’t. The third week of July comes quickly,

and this time we are facing utter homelessness; our friends have no vacant rooms for us to fill. My Saab, registered in my parents' name, is old and near breaking down, so we cannot go far. I pile what we need into the dirty burgundy car with over one-hundred-thousand miles on it, and I listen to the exhaust pipe clank as we drive around the lake, departing from our house once again. I think about the last time I spoke to my mother, right after graduating, a last-ditch effort on both our parts. I recall the rise in her voice as she said to me, "You know, Samantha, you can always come home, just not with *him*." The pipe on the back of the Saab begins to drag on the dirt when we pull into the lake's General Store.

The owner, Smitty, a man with a white beard and sunglasses, whom we have gotten to know, asks what we're doing. I try to explain: "See, we live on Cottonwood, but we have to be out for a week for a family, friends of the landlord, and we're looking for a place to stay." I trail off, thinking how pathetic this sounds. *Help me, I am homeless*, I feel like shouting, but I don't. Instead, Smitty leans in closer. "You know," he says, "I have a cabin across the road, in the woods. No bathroom, but there is electricity. We used to party there when I was younger." I can hardly believe my ears. "How much do you want for a week?" I ask. He shrugs, "I dunno, forty maybe, for the week?" We take the offer.

There are eight beds built into the walls of the cabin, and the screen door is full of holes. I listen as J. talks to his mother on the phone, sitting in a dingy brown recliner near the door. They fight about money. "But I *am* responsible," he yells, and the whole cabin shakes. I play an increasingly familiar game with myself, the "If-He-Hadn't" game, where I run through a list of how J. got here, asking his mother, who is far away, for money because he wants to buy a car. *If he hadn't been a cocaine addict, if he hadn't been arrested, if he didn't drink so much, if his father hadn't spoiled him, if he hadn't grown up in England.* These are things I cannot change,

things that weigh heavy on my chest as I realize that I have my own game and it is very simple: *If you hadn't started dating him, if you had been strong enough to get away, if you could find a way to leave him.* He feels complicated and overwhelming, and dangerous. I feel as if I am in too deep to leave; at this moment, the closest thing to home I have is J. And though that home is ill, and an addict, I cannot seem to walk out of it just yet. It's as if I've lost the key.

In the morning, I open the screen door to morning heat. I stumble over two full jugs of water on the flat stone step. I grab my toothbrush and pour water over the bristles, and brush my teeth this way. Smitty has left loose footprints in the dry dirt path.

At the end of the week, when I try to pay Smitty, he refuses. "I wasn't serious about the money," he says, and walks away.

The grand battement in ballet is my favorite, if only because of its discipline. We line up next to the barre, and one by one we must kick our legs in front of us, one at a time, as high as we possibly can. The leg lifts up quickly, down slowly, and the foot barely touches the ground as we switch legs. Right, up, down; left, up, down; right up, down, and so forth, until we make it completely across the room. We are not allowed to watch ourselves in the expansive mirrors. This lining up, the individual one-by-one movement always causes me worry, anxiety. The line moves too fast, each person at a different point on the floor. I have to know when to move as I count the music in eights. In my head, I hear: *five, six, seven, eight* and I step onto the floor to leave the long line of black leotards behind me. My arms are above my head, in an oval, my middle fingers almost touching, and within each kick, before a step forward, is a moment of absolute stasis, the body is itself a statue, before gravity and a compulsion to move forward causes movement. The grand battement, the "big sweep," brings movement between each breath,

when the leg is at its peak height, and all that is left is the lowering of it, the brief contact with the floor, and the other leg is swept back up again. It is a pendulum with a swing and a drop. This is the most difficult exercise for most, including myself, if only because the moment of stasis is not long enough and because the lifting of each leg becomes tedious and strained.

My parents refused to move as I was growing up, despite being unsatisfied with their house. When I was six, they built a house in Fairport. The house itself was small, and the downstairs ran in a circle; all the rooms surrounded the stairs in the center. The bedrooms were tiny, and for twelve years of my life, growing up, I shared a bedroom wall with my parents. My mom hated the small kitchen, my dad loved the yard. My mom liked the master bedroom, my dad liked the fireplace but not the front room. What they discovered, then, was that my mother had agreed to the blue prints because she thought my father loved them, and my father agreed to the floor plan because he thought my mother loved it. Neither actually did, and what was left was their slow remodeling: a new kitchen island, French doors to the deck, hardwood floors. What remained was the house they lived in to avoid moving again. To me, this was worse than moving, more defeating.

Once, when I was in college and home for a visit, my mother took me onto the deck and pointed to her giant burgundy hibiscus. They were beautiful, gaping open in the back lawn. My parents were in the middle of a marriage crisis. “Look, Samantha,” she said to me, her face bright in the waning evening sun, “they just open, and they’re so strong. I mean, aren’t they just wonderful?” In the background were lawnmowers, the vague scent of cut grass, the click of the lock as my paranoid father turned its silver knob behind us, the unlocking when we asked to come back in, the look of sorrow on my mother’s soft face.

A year has passed, and now, in the swelter of another July, we are house-sitting for a professor of mine in a suburb. Everything I own that has not been stuffed into another rental lake-house closet has been stuffed into the Saab. Everything. All my writing, letters from friends, a stuffed dog from New York City; his black nose is pressed against the back window. The inside smells like campfire, and J. has burned two perfect holes in the passenger seat from dropping cigarettes. We move in when the family has already left, leaving us a large, vacant house and a cat named Maehve. We drop our cat, Itty, onto the rug in the family room, and watch the two get acquainted. I am living in someone else's home; it is a strange feeling. We sleep in the guest room upstairs; the ceiling is sloped, with two skylights, and the desk in the corner is where I imagine the professor does all his work, his hands grazing the cherry surface. I take baths after work on rainy nights, and I cannot help but think of how odd it is to be completely naked in the same tub as he has been in. We drink wine on the screened-in porch, listen to the neighborhood settle, and hear children calling to each other in the twilight. But I feel uneasy. J. rages. I own nothing here.

When the professor returns for two days, we all live together in his home. I pad slowly down the stairs the first morning, and there he is, reading the newspaper and eating a bagel. He has bought us bagels. I am in my pajamas. I want my own house and my own juice glass and my own staircase to pad down on to approach my own guests. I shower quickly, leave my long hair dripping wet, dress for work and drag J. with me back to the lake, where we both work at the Beachcomber, a restaurant on the lake. Our shift doesn't start for hours, and we lie on our backs in the grass of a local park, the lake water lapping as boats pass. This is as close to home as I can come. It is not the need for ownership that strikes me as much as the need to have a place that I

feel comfortable in, one in which I can move the candlesticks from the dining room to the fireplace mantle and be satisfied that no one will move them back.

It is a busy night at the Beachcomber, and my friend Jeff is behind the bar. I stand at the cocktail station, right on time, and pull my hair up as tight as it will go. He says, “J. told me you guys need a place to stay in August,” and I nod. We do. We have been trying to find a place for one month; we signed a lease for a new house on the lake starting in September; this leaves us an entire month of homelessness again. My parents have no idea that I have been house-sitting twenty miles down the road from them.

“Yeah, we’re kinda stuck,” I say and lift my tray carefully off the bar. Jeff pushes his glasses up on his nose. “My parents have a house in Geneseo that they moved out of already, and it’s empty,” he says, “except for me, and Courtney, my brother, and probably Will.” His siblings and friends, home from college, have been throwing parties at this residence all summer, so I know the house he is talking about; it is huge, beautiful, and on the eighth hole of a golf course. His brother, a musician, also lives there - a kind of commune for the wealthy. “Stay with us,” he says and I think about moving in there, living with friends for a month. It is a unique combination of charity and social promise; I feel as pathetic as I do hopeful.

When J. and I load our things into the Saab, the professor and his family are on a plane, returning from California. We leave the place exactly as we found it, no trace of us whatsoever except a forgotten cat bed, two inflatable rafts, and an empty pill vial that we decide are all too futile to return for. When we pull into the house in Geneseo, our friends are already there, and they help us unload. I feel as if it is somewhat of a homecoming, only in that we are at least closer to the lake and to work. We are staying in a bedroom that has a distinct jungle theme, with

pictures of an African safari on the walls. I feel as if with every move I am traveling lighter, and with me now are only boxes of writing, loose piles of halter tops, two pairs of shorts, two pairs of pants, and a dress. J. has even less, with a meager few dress shirts hung in the closet and one pair of pants. I know I will lose things. I know I don't belong here, in the new house, but it is beautiful, wide, and open.

One night, after J. has passed out, the musician who lives here leans over to me in the garage. "You know, you can do better," he says. I have been easing out of my relationship with J., trying to spend less and less time with him. I know I can do better. In the driveway, the musician throws pieces of mulch at me, and we laugh together like children. He climbs into his enormous black van, rolls down the window. "Come with me," he says. I take his hand as I hoist myself up. He reaches over and touches my cheek. Houses whir by in the black landscape. Inside my head, I hear a faint, whirring voice. *Keep moving, it says. Get going.*

"Hold it...hold...hold," Kathleen, a new ballet teacher, says to us as we are on relevé in fifth position after a tedious barre exercise. As much as she stresses the importance of continuous movement, she also stresses something a bit newer, more difficult. My arms are above my head, in an oval, and I am on the balls of my feet, one foot in front of the other, clasped tightly together, my heels off the ground, in a traditional pose that I am supposed to hold for three counts of eight, as the music fades. "At the end of the exercise, let the audience take a moment, have a breath, give them something," she says as she circles the room. "Do not move, do not look down, focus your eyes on one thing and keep the gaze there." I am staring at the wall, but I think I understand this. Pausing, that brief stasis, is as important as the moving. There cannot be one without the other.

When J. and I finally move to the lake in September, on Graywood South, I am not as happy as I should be. What bothers me is not the hauling of luggage. It is, of course, J. He has formed an iron lining around my lungs. We are isolated within each other. We broke up during the month of August, but it feels false; we are foolishly moving into this house together, with a shared lease and a shared car. No longer completely afraid of him, I vow to ask him to find a new place to live at the end of September. I do not think that this will come as a surprise to him.

With J. out at a bar, I spend all day removing the taffeta above the windows lining the dining room, plugging in the old computer, hanging up pots and ladles. I spend days putting candles everywhere, folding towels over bars in the two bathrooms, hanging artwork on the walls. Finally, I think, a pause. An absolute breath of air, a brief moment of suspension.

The reflection of the moon on the lake ripples, sending particles of white light from one shore to another. It is October. I have just settled into the comfort of this lake house, noticing things like the slanted bedroom floors, the scent of the wooden chest when I open it. I am standing with friends by a bonfire outside when a chair comes through one of the large dining room windows, and shards of glass go everywhere. Just days ago, I asked J. to find a new place to live.

When I show up at my parents' front door, all I can think about is how strange it is that they stayed, how fortunate to have this house here that none of us like.

Days pass. I finally decide I have to retrieve my remaining possessions from the lake-house, those I have been carrying from place to place with me like a gypsy. On the way, I stop at my bank to empty my checking and savings accounts. The teller, a nice-looking, clean-shaven

twenty-something man, sighs and hands me seventeen dollars. “Oh my God,” I say, and lean into my mother, who is standing next to me. My accounts have been cleaned out by a British lunatic. When I leave the bank, the money tucked into my right back pocket does not even bulge.

I return to the lake with a police officer. We discover that J. has moved out himself, shirts and pants flung everywhere. Half of each closet is empty, and the artwork he loved is missing from the walls. The bed is made, and he has left shorts with rips in them, sweaters that were too big or too small. My mother packs almost all of my belongings, and I stand on the deck and watch the geese flap their wings on the water. For all the moving I have done, I could not have prepared for this. The scent of violence mingles with the sorrow of being dislodged. The guilt I feel is overwhelming, and my game ends: *You shouldn't have stayed so long. You really should have left.* The same way that I could never train my feet to arch further in ballet, I could not pack and move my belongings the way I was so accustomed to before. This was neither a movement nor a pause. It was the curtain falling on me in the middle of the first act, my pointe shoe snapping backstage.

I pile everything I own into my parents' living room. I leave everything there except what I need to dress each day. For two weeks, I feel homeless again in my childhood home. I also feel the momentum to move. In ballet, one works very hard to earn a solo performance. I know now that I have been choreographed for one. I trained and I trained, and when finally a solo performance opens up for me, I accept it.

Two weeks later, I stood in the empty apartment I would move into. It was small, with a tiny kitchen and even smaller bathroom, so when I was in the shower, I would be able to hear any guest breathing in the next room. But it was mine, a place I could finally settle into. I put everything into my parents' cars and the Saab, and a friend helped me put my apartment

together, lugging a television and pieces of a bed up the wooden stairs. I put dried flowers on the kitchen wall, and put all my books on the bookshelves. I moved candles from the living room to my bedroom, and no one moved them back.

Shift and Sway

Amber

When I got engaged, my fiancé Dan proposed with a delicate amber ring: four silver prongs, one amber stone, one finger, one yes. I wore the ring as if it were my sister -- older, better-traveled, worn. I have always loved amber, its light intensity, its multi-yellowed, aged faces. I nearly lost her on the brink of a city sewer grate; the stone slipped right out of its setting; I banged my hand on the car door; it was dawn and so early; and there she went, flickering like a gem on fire. Finally, on my knees, I crouched almost on top of her, and I plucked her between my fingers. I brought her back to Dan, crying these big wet tears, fluid as her sap in the prongs.

Stone

I come from a family that is bound by stone. I protested when the creek bed in my parents' front lawn eroded and was filled in with musky sod. I nested, in a tie-string satin bag, heaps of shiny rocks, an arrowhead from the creek, stones from our driveway before it was paved. I always wanted to remember it as it was: cold, hard, stone, something that could not be changed. Ore and lava rocks -- my dad brought these back from trips. They were changeable, malleable. They were never as worthy to me; they always held the combustible potential to change shape, and melt, stick together, become even more porous. Some of the rocks my dad brought back from Europe were so full of holes, I wondered where he'd been. I collected stones. I loved exposed mountain rock, the click of pebbles against the road, cascading in small avalanches.

Live Free or Die: New Hampshire

When I visit my grandmother, New England seeps into my pores, trail sap and rainwater move down my fragile teenage cheeks, dousing me with fresh wet spring air. I can almost trace my fingerprints against the rock face before her log cabin; I can almost see my footprints. The atmosphere is rock and chance: the grass on the mountains here is moss. We walk to the road to get her mail; by mid-morning, the fog will lift and the temperature will rise with my polio-stricken grandfather. He will put on a black-and-red flannel, stuff a doughnut into his steepled mouth, a black triangle of want, and ignore the mountains behind him. He will face the day with passivity reserved for the handicapped, and his brace will start to eat into his smaller leg. The steel is stronger than the denim pant leg; the steel is stronger than the sedimentary rocks facing him, winding his day down early with silver shadows. Each night, I empty my pockets at the guest bedside table: occasionally, I see an igneous stone, and put it off to the side.

Cubic Zirconium

My father brought home a cubic zirconium for me: it was pink and mounted on a gold-painted setting. He was sober when he bought it. He was happy, his face was bright. My mother watched me pin back the crystal box top, thinking it was a diamond, something pilfered from a mine. I jammed it onto my ring finger; he kissed my delicate cheek. It shone underneath our chandelier in the dining room; it was a stone that was a mineral that wasn't a diamond that was mine. I loved it. At night, I asked it questions about the rocks it lived with, about the size of stones it was cut from, about the factory where all the pink zirconium met. In it, synthetics and oxidation: processes made by man. In it, my life history: an only child, two parents, one drunk, one sober, one pink, one white. My father was pink because of his cheeks; my mother was white because she was pure.

Asphalt

When I am ten years old, my parents decide to pave the driveway. I have taken to the rocks that slope downhill toward our small cul-de-sac's road, have stored a few of the shiniest white-grey rocks away in my dresser. When the time comes, my dad takes the day off work to watch, and he has a crew pour the man-made tar across the freshly raked surface; all the rocks have been piled in a long truck bed. I give each rock a name and they share one emotion: an echo of the loneliness they feel when they pull away. The hydrogen-carbon tar settles on the drive in black; a soft breeze settles upon it and nothing moves. The wind tries puddling air on the top, but only a few stray shards of cut grass from the neighbor's front lawn glide and stick. It looks like a painting, a subtle trick of the eye. That night, I lament the rocks and consider stepping into the sticky, unified substance, but think better of it. I don't want to wake my dad. I do not want to get into trouble sneaking out to leave footprints on the night.

Amethyst

Of all the stones to be assigned for a birthstone, this one is purple. When my friend and I, in the fifth grade, attend a field trip to a history museum, we sneak off during a lesson on corn husking and find the gift store. It's full of wooden bins stocked with colorful birthstones. Amy's birthday is in January, which is a bright, magenta heart of a stone; the black cursive name underneath its bin is simply Garnet. April is full of shiny rock crystal, Diamonds as good and clear as rock candy on a string. May, the time of year when everything blooms, is endearingly Emerald, which gleams off the charts. And I am captivated by the July stone, the name of Ruby so elegant, and red. There are June's Pearl, which my mother wears on her right ring finger, and September's autumnal Sapphire, an emboldened way to release fall into the air, escaping from summer, and of course, Topaz, which I think is amber but is really November's own stone, not amber in the least. December is labeled Turquoise, and I hold a human-heart-shaped piece in my palm; when we are

caught by the Room Mother, she finds me tracing the fine black lines of the turquoise stone, wondering what worlds it has already seen. As we leave, I catch a brief glance of February's Amethyst, a clear, purple stone cut into hard points, diamond-shaped and gaudy. I have never seen an amethyst ring, and wonder why I have never known this was my stone.

Amber

The second time I lose my amber engagement stone, Dan and I are in a heated fight about a coworker of his, one whom I am convinced, after two bottles of wine, wants to sleep with him. "Why is she always in your office?" I scream at him, my lungs wide open, and I swing around to face him. As I do, my left hand caustically hits a low, oaky kitchen cupboard, hard, and the amber goes flying. Soon, I am on my knees, looking. "Fuck," I say as Dan gets on the ground. "Sam," he says, "it's got to be here." We look for what seems like forever. His hands span the dirty tiles, cover bread crumbs from dinner. I spy the stone on its back, the glue from the setting exposed on its underbelly; it's sitting against a stool leg on the carpet far away. I grab it, and we both stand. "I am so sorry," I say, and we stare at each other. We have just moved to Kansas; it's pouring outside. The wind is fierce, and I am constantly afraid of a tornado knocking us clear away. I take the amber stone, look at it once, and jam it back in its setting. "There," I say, proud. Dan's face is ashen. "It's fine," I say, climbing onto a stool, pouring myself some wine.

Shale

In Kansas, there are no naturally occurring lakes; all the ones we know of are man-made and have snakes crawling in them. Printed in the newspaper, to mark the end of August, is a feature story about a family who went boating at Clinton Lake, near us. They discovered that, as they pattered along, a snake had slithered up into the motorboat, settling in the back. The child watched this happen. I read Dan the story. "Let's go," I say.

Clinton Lake is complicated; from one embankment, we can see a marina, a yacht club, sailboats docked and swaying in the wind. We have hiked a completely flat trail, our feet plodding over what appears to be burnt, sun-exhausted grass. The trail leads us to the edge of the muddy lake, which is brown and barely lapping with waves. We hike along the ridge, watching for fish, and see none. Dan is, I know, precariously watching for snakes. I crouch against a tiny rock embankment farther down. The rock face here is a soft, cottony orange, almost a brash yellow. The stone rubs off on the tips of my fingers, and crumbles when I pick it up. Its layers are thin and like pie crust; they break easily. On our way out, I stuff a larger rock into my pocket. I place it on the kitchen floor for our cats to sniff. One puts his pink nose on the stone, and orange power rubs off on it, and he sneezes. We laugh, and he runs away. The rock, my Kansas first, is dangerous: its layered approach to sustainability makes me nervous, as if we have moved to a place where everything can be taken apart, as if anything I want to accomplish might turn to dust and burnt powder in my own two hands.

Bauxite

After my parents got divorced, Dan and I moved into our apartment in Kansas, married only two weeks, and my father turned to bauxite. He became an old, grey weathered rock, shifting into aluminum as he took a factory job working nights, from five o'clock until one o'clock in the morning. He began to send me emails late at night, and I could see the earth weathering him. Contained in him: my frustration at having an alcoholic father, the gifts he gave me when I was a child, the love my mother lost for him. All of this is rough grey matter; he is a cemented frailty, unknockable. He has begun sending cards to me in the mail in bunches; they are all cards I wrote to him when I was a teenager, when I was seven, when I loved him more, with less bauxite building up to compound him into one long rock. He asks for the cards back, and Dan tells me to

keep them, to cherish what I used to feel for my father to help me understand how things have changed. Every night that my father calls, it is on his dinner break, at nine o'clock, and I can hear change machines, vended goods, in the wide hallways behind him. I think he is turning into a form of aluminum, something tin, more malleable, made into a ball and thrown.

Aluminum Foil

My favorite food was a baked potato when I was growing up, as if to indicate my high level of anxiety; baked potatoes are supposedly soothing, like placing your toes across hot ore. My mom would wrap aluminum foil around three baking potatoes in the oven, and after about an hour, she would tong them, place them on our plates, and they would steam with heat. I always fully removed mine from its foil wrapping, and set the foil on the side of my plate. At the end of dinner, as my mom and I cleared the table while my father sat back and watched, he wadded up my foil into a ball. He and I would then get on our knees at one end of the narrow kitchen, and roll the ball as far as we could to get to the other side. On good days, he would mold his own, too, and we would race. On bad days, he would sit at the table, alone, drinking the rest of his vodka and orange soda, watching passively as our dog barked and yipped along the tiles, racing after the metallic ball. Made from aluminum ore and bauxite, the ball would stumble unevenly, often stopping before it reached the carpeted living room.

The Mountain State: West Virginia

Dan and I share a best friend named Ben, who moved to West Virginia. We were devastated; it was far from us, and all the mountains there contain bituminous coal, shale, and are Appalachian. From the Pittsburgh airport, where we have flown in for a visit from Kansas, we have to travel by car another eighty-five minutes, and I sit in the back of Ben's station wagon, nauseously watching the mountains pass by. Before leaving Pennsylvania, I spot a colorful Ikea sign etched

into the side of a large mountain; aside from this spectacle, the landscape is a full-blown and barren shade of grey. Occasionally, I spot some chalky crosses nailed to the rocks, but these, too, turn a shale grey. As we pass by the rocks, Ben says he's happier than he's ever been. He says he forgot to clean his shower, but that's fine. We nod. It is good to see Ben.

Ben's shower and bathroom ceiling are crawling with black mold, a porous substance that is forcefully eating through his paper walls, and nesting in the seams of the tiles. The black is almost green and this almost pushes us immediately back to the Pittsburgh airport, past all the rotting limestone on the sides of the cliffs, hanging there. Instead, we apply Clorox to everything except the ceiling, and notice the stash of drugs Ben's hiding in a drawer in an oak table next to the futon that functions as his bed.

Reverberations

"Rocks vibrate," Ben says to us upon re-entering his apartment; he's been down the street, sleeping with his girlfriend. "Did you know that?" he asks us. "You mean, when we explode a rock face?" I ask. He looks at me, disparagingly. "No, I mean all the time."

Rocks' vibrations are reverberations to me, echoes of heat and light when it's too hot and humid. Heat spills off rocks when it rises in summer; heat turns tar to mush and our driveways and our roads look waxy and malleable, as if we could ball them like foil. Rocks have minds of their own, these beating magenta or grey hearts of ore and lava. Inside a volcano, everything shakes, and the eruption quakes everything we consider to be solid. Rocks move and change and etch new beginnings, trail down mountains as pebbles, new starts. To Ben, everything beats constantly, echoing a livable, movable space, slightly tremouring in stillness. His hands shake as he says this. "Too much coffee," he says.

Beans

A week after Christmas, when I was a freshman in college, my father stayed home from work, nursing a hangover, and asked me if I wanted to grab a coffee with him. I said sure. We went to the Town Coffee Roaster, a new café that was near his barber. Sitting there, he ordered Blue Mountain coffee, and asked the owner where he got it. “Jamaica,” he told him, tending to other customers. My father, restless and manic, asked who his supplier was. Instead of taking a simple answer, my father hauled me back into the car, my Kenyan dark roast in a to-go cup between my hands, on our way to the supplier’s warehouse.

The coffee roasters in the back of the warehouse were fat silos full of beans, all types of levels of caffeine labeled on their sides. As we moved through the back rooms, we came across a yellow bucket full of shiny, round stones. I peered in. They were rocks that didn’t make it through the grinding process. I wanted to put my hand in and touch them; some were pink and some were perfect, gaudy quartz. They were a bucket of displacement, a roaster’s discards. My father and I stumbled through the tour, and afterwards, we tasted a fresh sample of Blue Mountain roast. “You want to take some home?” I suggested. My dad stared at me, “Nah,” and we were on our way, coasting back over the empty asphalt roads, clear of any traffic.

Amber

In the Detroit airport: a water fountain, with spurts of water like fish jumping, independent of each other, people running, flat moving escalators, newspaper stands. We are making a connecting flight from Pittsburgh to Kansas; it’s the middle of winter. I am holding onto Dan’s arm, walking quickly to our gate, when I look down: the amber stone is gone from my ring, the prongs scarily empty. I gasp, point. We turn on our heels and retrace our steps. All these people’s feet kick at the air, as if the stone is not underfoot. It’s nowhere. We walk all the way back to the bathrooms. I enter, go to the toilet I was sitting on a few minutes earlier, though it’s occupied. I

drop to my knees, look under the stall, the neighboring stalls, but nothing. I move to the sink: on top of the grate, the stone gleams in a puddle of soapy water. I pluck it from the white foam, rub it off on my sleeve. I race to find Dan, holding the stone up to the artificial airport light. "I got it!" He's amazed.

On the landing, there are no mountains, and the earth is as green as it is brown. The landing is rough, I hold Dan's arm. I can hear the landing gear emerge from underneath. Out the window, closer to the earth: rocks, in large bulk, next to a river, asphalt landing strips, sedimentary pieces of rock that have changed and been eaten at and eroded from snow, run-off, wind. Today it's a bit windy, raining intermittently; snow tomorrow, the pilot says. The wind skims off the rocks as we land; we hit the earth with reverberating glory: the asphalt and rocks vibrate and shift.

Appalachia

This town is a mess in a sad state. The hills are soot and metal, the taste of dental fillings. In my friend's apartment, the world is a ziplocked pyre of clothes and mold. The mirrors hold dust and not much else; my reflection is different in every one. The bathroom is the center of a black universe, with dark, diseased circles of black mold across the ceiling tiles. My friend has trouble breathing, and headaches: now I know why. His head always itches, and I am afraid to sit down, take a bite of the cheese he sets on a cutting board, afraid to put my lips around the rim of a coffee cup. From his kitchen window, the neighborhood slants in groping sweeps, nonsense planning for houses on a hill. There is no tract housing, no straight line. Instead, there is a mini-mart and poverty, whole lives wrapped around this town. My friend sleeps on a futon made with unwashed sheets, wrinkled from body grease. A cat claws at the downstairs door, but he won't come in. I cannot blame him.

My friend winds me down the long streets, meanders me through the woods and down a path. The main drag is a piece of coal and steel, a windy tunnel of loss. In a bar, he sees college students that used to be his; they slap high fives. Behind me, there is a hole in the wall; I worry about the rats shuffling inside; I hear their nails on thin concrete. I hate this fucking place, so I keep drinking beer and swill it into the sides of my mouth, a sign that I am very nervous. When I met my friend, he was living like this, but we were in college and nothing made sense, and we smoked together and drank together and laughed about the undone laundry and the dirty dishes. Now, we teach others in two different states. We watch the students eye us, as if we know something they need to have, as if we have any fucking answers. My friend lives worse than most of them do, and he came from a good family. I worry that this state is the last that will see

him, that his reinvigorated use of LSD and bourbon is somehow his way of saying help, except that he never says it.

Sober, we stare at each other like two little kids: our moms are away and we are done for. The mountains, I think, will surely eat us. I am not used to this hand-to-mouth living. I flew here in a fucking airplane and I am pissed and cold and stony silent because this is not who I am and I think this later, across my friend's kitchen table as he sloshes some more bourbon into a clear glass. The houses do not light up at night; they just settle and shut down, wait for the next shitty day. The clouds muster some strength and spit rain at us, onto the windows, and we sit in silence. There are worlds among us that we will never visit, worlds I will imagine on my bumpy flight home, as promising as any bright day, as staged as the snow on the way back home.

A Friend's Apartment; A Snowstorm

Crooked, warped floors tilt the empty hallway. Bananas stand on the cherry table, the whiskey bottles, half and three-quarters drunk, are on display. Outside, patients wait for the psychiatrist to arrive, their cars heating up and frothing at the windows, the snow really starting now, the parking lot full. The people below us wait as we take our beers cold and full, drinking with a solace we haven't had in years. The porcelain sink shines against the storm, the wine cork from last night's dinner sits used, tired. The hum of the appliances cooks with our voices, these conversations so rarely in person now. The faces of us all turning to one another, the disbelief of the present, peach flesh, the rosy cheeks, the human touch, the lull and silence drops us to our knees, grateful. The patients leave, start their cars again, and drift along those icy streets.

Papaya Whip Yellow and Bisque Lobster Pink; or, the Orchids in Our Days

For the Greeks, who had no word for irreversible death, one did not die; one darkened.

*-Mark Strand, *The Weather of Words**

When I was twelve, my father made me stay up late to watch a meteor shower on the front lawn. Sprays of light and star were predicted and we sat on the sloped hill, grass underneath us, staring at the sky. It was the same sky I had wished upon, but the depth of it was different. Even in upstate New York, with neighborhood lamp-posts and train signals, the sky widened. Sitting there, on my cold hands, I thought about what would happen if the earth went black, if every sight we saw was taken from us, those of us blessed enough to see in the first place. What must it be like, to have all those colors, the glorious red apples hanging from bright green trees, the brown speckled sparrows at the yellow birdfeeder, the pink shutters my parents hung after their tenth anniversary, reduced to vacant glares? What would it be like, I wondered, silent with my father, eyes toward the sky, to have all the shades taken away?

Most of us on earth would be largely affected if the world turned to ash and we could no longer distinguish one color from the next, one degree of darkness from another. The day my husband asked me to marry him, the lilies he was holding were red, and wrapped in soft lavender paper. The last time I visited my mother, I recall, the pines in her backyard were almost a fluorescent green, something like mashed peas. Her hair was white and blonde, with shimmers of yellow as she moved through the morning sun, feeding her sparrows. As I sat in the airport, waiting to return to the Midwest, New Hampshire's mountains bulged blue and ocean green out the clear windows.

One summer, when I was working at a public library, a little boy, deaf, and his mother came in for the weekly Story Hour. She sat in the back and signed to him, and he giggled when parts of the book were funny. Before they left, the mother came to the counter to check out some

books. On the edge of the desk sat a jar full of candy: the little boy pulled at its handle until his mom swapped his hand away. As she turned her back, he reached up on the balls of his feet, knocking the jar to the ground, sending shards of broken glass across his small shoes. The sound of the glass shattering was jarring, but he couldn't hear the crash, so he stuck his hand straight into the pile, plucking a large, angular piece out before his mom could stop him. He held it, his flesh uncut, up to the window: sunshine beat straight through it, and it gleamed.

As a child, I reasoned that being blind would be worse than being deaf. Without sight, I could not see how people felt about me; without hearing, I could still know just by looking into my mother's eyes that she was mad at me. I could still see the first snowflakes of winter, the steam off the hot chocolate, the wine in my father's glass. Sight weaves grooves into our brains regarding seasonal changes, those dirt roads we once took and cannot find again. At age twelve, in my bedroom mirror, I stood with my banana- yellow stretch-pants and my white-and-canary-yellow-striped sweater, agonizing over their different shades. I still remember trying on brighter white socks, pulling them up as far as they would go, in the hopes that they would distract the viewer's eyes from my two mismatched favorite pieces of clothing. Staring at myself in that mirror, my cotton-candy-pink canopy bed in the background, I admired the way the room looked so cozy in its subdued golden light just before breakfast.

A world without color is so foreign to me, I cannot picture it. In the building where I work, there is a blind woman who harnesses her yellow lab and navigates the halls tentatively. Once, in the bathroom, I looked down and was startled to see her dog wedged between stalls, staring at me. Its eyes were wide brown discs, warm with facial recognition: his tail wagged a little, and his eyes focused in on my face. The dog knew I had seen him, had understood that I saw him there. I was now in his visual memory. He had been loyal to his owner, but she could

not say *I see you* with her eyes, even though the power between her hands and his harness was intuitive and personal. I wondered: does she touch this dog and feel his fur as something colorless? Yellows – slow-churned butter or comfortable afternoon sunshine – were the shades the dog turned in that bathroom, under the fluorescent lights, unseen by his owner, the one who loved him the most.

Ordinarily, we are afforded basic terms for primary colors: red, yellow, blue. But some names are more complicated; they must be. Cornsilk, a soft white, is my great-grandmother's face, her powdered cheeks porcelain and pale. Thistle, a purpled grey, is reminiscent of aging irises in late August, or faded sidewalk chalk drawings. Lemon Chiffon sifts through meringues and whipped creams, a delicate balance of yellow and white, a blush of sweet on the lips. Ghost White is nearly invisible, a hint of color, odorless. Just days ago, walking home late from the library at night, I encountered students crouched on the sidewalk, chalking the names of fallen soldiers in the war in Iraq. The white chalk barely shone on the dull grey cement, almost as if the names, all strung together, became a unified colorless whole.

When I was growing up, my favorite bird was the bright gawking flamingo; stuffed ones flocked by the handful into my bedroom, but I did not know to call their feathers Vermilion or Crimson. I called them Hot-Pink. The typical color of orange autumn leaves, at the cusp of their turning, is actually something called Avignon Berries; when they change over into their most acute colors, a pinnacle of spectatorship, the exacting color of their oranges is aptly called Flaming Maple. As cold moves in, and roads and ponds freeze, that mid-winter ice coating a lake is Baltic, reminiscent of a glittering summer sea.

Classifications of colors can and often do actually jog memories; floral papers are a Bishop's Violet; Daybreak is a light, violet hue. Had I not made connections between a soft rose

and its deep-red petals, or dawn and its light-pink atmosphere, my own associations might fail me. What I have instead: blood-red (or, rather, dried blood) is actually a color called Bittersweet, a tug backward to me falling over my handlebars and losing my front teeth. Yes, bittersweet. The color of an actual camel, or camel-colored shoes, or a camel-woven coat, is closer in hue to Burnished Gold, and the exact color of my best friend's favorite winter coat. The color Camel, named in a palette, is in fact a cold slate grey. The color of seasonal dusk on a grid is called Jasper; I can see Jasper in any night sky, and feel the world slide through the window screens at home, in my kitchen.

Some mornings, I get out of bed before dawn, slink into old, black lacrosse shorts, and go for a run. Because we are on the brink of fall, there is a slight coating of dew on the grass, and a bite in the crisp air. I must navigate in the near-dark, the earth a spin away from the sun, the sky a thick blankness, something unseen in the steps ahead. I run over cracked sidewalks, broken glass, and suffer missteps in the black. This deep morning invisibility troubles me, because it is so unforgiving and heavy. There is a change in the earth as it moves, a gradual weight into human helplessness; when we can no longer see, when the sky boasts wide shades of bruising black, we can no longer get hold of anything.

Weeks ago, I sat on the floor of my apartment, glued to an ABC "Prime Time" special featuring ten ways the world theoretically could end, listing causes like the Avian Bird flu, smallpox, nuclear missiles. I sat on the floor, sipping wine and looking at my cat's reflection in the thick window. Soon, as the countdown neared completion, asteroids came into the picture: giant, supersonically fast pieces of planet mass. In a colorful graphic, a new asteroid that has recently been discovered flew toward me, orange and porous, like pumice. When it collided with

our planet, tsunamis were seen from space, earthquakes demolished cities, flooding moved through the Midwest. But it was the aftermath, that calm after the earth was scorched, our trees and animals burned down, our bones evaporating into immediate dust, that most concerned me. The chance of survival is probable for some, even after an asteroid or a supervolcano splays feet of ash over every living thing. People, a scientist claimed, will emerge into a world of ash, heavier and deadlier than snow. The world will be blank. Whoever crawls out from their steel-iron shelters will experience a completely black world, a canvas so dark you will not know what is in front of you, seeing nothing but darkness. The ash will remain for years, and will coat the insides of your already black lungs, and the sun will be blocked by it, spiraling us into another ice age. As I understood it, sitting on the floor with the lights turned on, everything will be entirely void.

Ash is such a soft structure; it packs itself lightly; it is unimposing, and quiet. Ash, though, offers little solace to us in the tangible: after one has turned to ash, after one is grey and heaping, it runs from our palms, it is too fine to put in a pocket, it floats on soft winds that carry it away. It simply runs, all the colors sliding, dulling, all those shades of human, offering little solace. When my first dog, Lassie, died, my mom had her cremated. When Lass arrived back in our house, she sat heavy on the mantle in a plastic bag of sooty grey ash. It was impossible, even at age twelve, to grasp the weight of her in the ash: her bark was a soft yellow, protective, and wasn't there. Her brown and white fur on her tulip ears, and her deep brown eyes, chocolate in their warmth, were missing. Ash erased it all. Even her fanged incisors, a filmy putrid green, were unsatisfying dust. Its consistency could suffocate, all the particles fine and crumpled into a colorless mass. To me, ash was a chalky pile of sadness, everything mashed into what I could not get back.

Each frame of color that we encounter is processed by our brain, and can wire us to a memory. When autumn subsides to a blanketed first snow, our perceptions change, even if only slightly. Soon, blinking strings of holiday lights emerge on porches, and even our breath in the early mornings or late evenings emits a fine stream of white smoke. But colors change things. The day my husband and I moved to Kansas, my first memory of the place is the shock of kelly-green trees lining the streets. Our first tornado is a pea-green sky in my brain, a shiny, metallic, and moving sky so briefly silver we cannot forget it. As my mother ages, her face reddens near her sloped nose, and each time I see her, the bluish veins in her cheeks seem more alert, freshly purple. Her hair, lovely strands of blonde and sandalwood, goes grey. Like ash, grey washes the livable colors on our hair away toward a more unified grey mass; we take this to mean we've led dignified lives, and have changed along these years that move as fluidly as a healthy blue river.

A compelling part of being alive is that we have color in words, and we have color in food, taste, and touch. To have seen the color peach before is, for me, to recognize the inside of a lover's thigh. Tasting lobster risotto is yellow and blue, rich in its golden hues and soft oceanic edges. Having the experience of color renders the senses powerful and cohabitant, where a black ugly truffle tastes a lovely doughy brown, an aged woman's laugh can be the color of new yellow roses in the yard. Given the hues and shades of the world, we hold much circumstance by coloring each one, or at least in assigning a color of the earth to a livable experience.

Some colors are weary, like a watery black, a streaky hospital green, the yellow bile of a sick baby. The drastic firebrick reds and midnight blues of atomic destruction, or the deep browns ochres of supervolcanic eruption, only trace the surface of what we experience daily. When we step into the road at dawn, the asphalt's depth unapparent and dangerous, the sky a

thick blank slate, there are trees lining the road to consider, their grassy-green leaves, the Naples-Yellow lines in the roads as bright as growing pumpkins.

As a girl, I asked repeatedly if I could paint my bedroom sky blue, with white cumulous clouds near the ceiling. My parents' answer was always the same: no. They told me to just look out the window. Open the blinds. Watch the way each day turns and twists its colors around. They were right. Colors herald the stalling of nocturnal moments or premature dawns; they stain orchids pink during fluky, dusked lightning; sun bursts through clear broken glass, splintering everything; colors can bundle flowers on the side of the road; they plow through a late afternoon snow you're driving through, hexagonal white flakes pummeling the windshield, the whole world in front of you, a sliding blank whiteout.

Color Scheme

1. Turning

Yellow daffodils in a stream. Lively melodramatic lilies on the banks, as orange as tulips in full bloom. Poppies line their own field, filling no vases, only space and time. Red as a bird's blood balancing on a beak. Blue clouds above coat everything twilight.

Then, a pearl moon face on the roses, a tint of pink shale on the beach sand.

Burnt umber ruins the lilies, and the daffodils sink in a sepia dawn. The roses open to flesh ochre skies, but nothing is ever the same.

Dodger-blue blue jays haunt the tree branches. They squawk and squawk in thick whiskey tones and they have no regard for the human. Underneath pine and cone, they worry away the firebrick cardinals with feathers afire with glory. The jays peck at brown seedlings intertwined with the cyan-white snow. Even the sparrows stay away.

The lake turns to ice. Calm as snow. Oblivious to its own light blue dent in the white sky, the bare ground. Each day the grass works harder to resist its beige beginnings. No boats pass here. Ice moves to shore in wind. Underneath, too turquoise to tell the surface is unstable. Fish turn with green gills, orange eyes curious. Up ahead, some downy white snow, replete with the thickness of platelets from a girl whose favorite color is a delicate light salmon pink.

2. Palette

Firebrick Red. He was red-faced and stammering; he was aflame.

Cornflower Blue. The wide sky, my face in it, the landscape a giant waterslide. The heart a thing of the past, so blue it could extinguish the measure of any fire or the heat of a father's red heart.

Permanent Green. Something to love in the middle of a great rain. Something no one has ever seen, it's so perfectly green. Something like the clovers we step on and palm in our hands. Something like the lilt of a voice that says yes.

Lawn Green. Dusk. The sky a sea of change, true as my mother's eyes. The yard bouncing with bunnies and the mower hunting them down. Each strand of grass cut and loose, sliding under my father's boots.

Carrot. We stood pulling roots out of the ground. They were cylindrically orange, stung with kelly-green ends. We pulled and pulled, and out they came, these rich bits of orange earth. It was the year before he was diagnosed, uprooted.

Yellow. A failed liver or a smile. A stunning flower or a bad bruise. A bright spot or a blinding one. The sun, a father. A father's laugh, a lightning bolt.

3. Mom

Mom says that all chickens come out white. She says that a New England snow is as pure as clear ice on a sunny day. She waits for dawn to break to take a walk, and she heads straight into the sun. Her favorite color is yellow because she says it gives hope. Her favorite flower is lilac; it's a hue. Asleep, alone, her face holds no color. In the daylight, her flesh can trace veins and map routes, as if all her purple organs rest and store up to brace the day.

Lamp-black shade is thin as shale. Ivory black skims the waves. Evening gowns trace
shade underneath skirts. Cold grey shade always at the beach after a storm. Warm grey shade
under my mother's arms.

Titanium white when there's nothing left.

A Pattern of Light

'Now, in the morning, when I light the fire I mean to look out the window to see what the sun is doing to the day' – Sethe, in Toni Morrison's Beloved

In upstate New York in June, the days burnt our suburban lawn with the raw sun-stroked light, the beams reddening my mother's already-tanned shoulders, lightening up her already-blonde hair. One afternoon, I leave my white plush kitten in the front yard, with an orange tic-tac I was saving on her small back. In the sun and heat, the tiny candy has smelted synthetic orange across the cat's fur. I wail in my mom's hot arms as she rocks me against the fiery rubber strips of her lounge chair, letting me know the cat is the same, just tanned. I had panicked; I believed that the sun was perilous, able to alter my appearance for the rest of my life. After that, I paid strict attention to the beams upon me, knowing that no matter what I did, they could enter through the ozone, lightning fast, and change each hour of every day.

Today, I practice yoga in our large kitchen, and watch our bumbling orange-and-white cat Cow run into the glass slider, tumbling for the streaky sunspot on the carpet; each time I move my body, contorting it into shadows and lines, the cat follows the light, and its sudden absences, straight into the walls. He stares at the sun for hours; I have often contemplated how his retinas must be seared straight through, his eyesight deteriorating rapidly. But he's happiest here, in the flat Kansas sun, with the winter air giving off a rough blue tint. In the mornings, before coffee and after the yoga is over, I sit on the ground and pull Cow onto my lap until he leaps from my grasp and chases a fleeting image, a beam, a moving and unsteady white light.

Once, on a rainy Thursday morning, my father pulled me out of school for the day to go to the Corning Museum of Glass, two and a half hours away from where we lived in Fairport, New York. The museum was famous for its glass-blowers; they gave you a demonstration as you

walked through the place, and everyone in my sixth-grade class wanted to go there, and bring back glass animals or glass weapons.

The workshop was almost entirely dark, save for the flames flashing from the blow-torches and the opened ovens where flattened glass was inserted, becoming hot enough to blow and form into shapes. Flame leapt from all corners into the centers of glass orbs, mesmerizing me. In the half-light, everything moved at a slower pace; I could see the faces of the torch-men, concentrated on setting their glass pieces in place. Each piece was unique and embodied the artistry of heat. At one station, I watched a man blow a liquid form into an oblong glass vase; as it cooled, nearby blow-torch flames reflected from its center, a pulsation.

In the gift shop, on the way out, my dad picked out a new set of dinner plates for my mom; they were bright white and oversized. On our way to the register, I noticed a small glass fish with elaborate tails; its fins were hand-crafted and active. The fish swam in the air. My dad studied it in his large hand, set it on the counter. “This too?” the cashier asked, looking more to me than to him. We nodded. She wrapped it in some thin, cream tissue paper, and handed it to me. On the way home, I held the glass fish to the light fading down the slopes of the treacherous hills we traveled over. The fish’s center turned a dusky orange, a powdery yellow, before finally changing to a bright cobalt night-sky blue, adjusting to nightfall, as we pulled into our driveway. Inside, I set the fish on my nightstand, and watched him indicate the day each morning; the clearer he got, the better the day. The sootier, the dingier, the worse the day would be. When my father left our family, I diligently kept the fish, watching for any sign of his face in the glass, looking for clarity when there was none.

After college, I lived on a lake that bloomed with morning sunshine. One morning in early September, I watched the easterly winds billow the front curtains; they were floor-length and bright. The waves moved from the center of the small lake; they were diamond points of glass. Beams shot through them as they lessened toward the shore, and by the time they petered out underneath the dock, they were green and turquoise. After a few weeks, it became clear that the lake responded to the sunlight just as a small child would: with little hesitation and full absorption, and when the light backed away underneath autumnal directives, and cloudy afternoons, leaves fell off trees, fish died and washed to shore, and the waves diminished to small whitecaps, frothing mad. The air changed, the lake's formation altered and eroded its shores, and the light I had was suddenly taken, rotated, spun on another axis, across another plane of water, into others' drapes and window screens. I sat on the couch and watched the grey light intrude, the snowfall come on in late October, the white wisp of my own breath on the deck, as I searched for a way to bring the light back.

The following summer, I found myself searching for different light, drugged light, in Amsterdam, during their bleak and chilled August rains. Most days, it rained or clouded, likely from latent historical sorrow. The Anne Frank House sat quietly on the corner of Prinsengracht Avenue. The streets were brick, though not Parisian brick. These bricks were hand-held moments of weight, livable mass that stood red and coarse under my feet. I wandered the streets in the near-dark days. I imagined how pale Anne must have gotten; then I toured museums that cast low lighting and dim halogen shadows, making the day as rough as a grey sheep's wool.

One afternoon, in a coffee shop called Mellow Yellow, I watch men roll hash in their sticky hands, the small rectangular blocks sold by the quarter-ounce. I sit at the counter, and the sun comes out. It rolls through the foggy windows, and on a mushroom stool, I notice an old man

coughing. Through the dusty particles visible in the sunbeam, his spittle forces its way out of his mouth. He holds, in one hand, a long and thin joint, and in the other, a pint of amber ale. His wears on his white head a black top-hat, and his knees touch those of another, close at a separate table. His eyes, when he raises them, are a thick black, rimmed with absolute blue. He looks lost and distant, though not completely a stranger. It seems as if he comes here often, and as he coughs, the sun winds its slow, methodical way down his long face, the whiskered chin formed from long bones. The light turns auburn, brushing against his smoking joint. This was not, perhaps, what Anne dreamed of in her tiny space, though the sunlight romps for her anyway, and pleats her sorrow across this man's body in creases.

I eat dinner outside, with a glass of chardonnay and smoked portabella mushroom lasagna. The street walkers pass me by, and many of them stare at the spear of light piercing my glass. Afterward, I head to a local bookstore with a wine bar inside. I have come to realize that everything in Amsterdam has been built on a foundation of shifting consciousness, like the shaky light. In the shop, dried roses hang in every color, and some drape over the books, silk ribbon acting as fingers, pointing absently to pages on the shelf. I sit, and a woman with raven-colored hair plucks a wide glass off the ceiling rack and pours me a merlot. "Here," she says, and smiles. The town breathes. The light is a doormat, having dropped to the floor. The sun is a heavy weight, dropping in bundles of red-orange glow. After my second glass of wine, the sun is almost gone, and the books lament it, curving into their bindings on the dark shelves. As I stand to leave, I notice a triangle of light on the bar, and the focused warmth of it dances on my back.

Later on, I wander through the red-light district; first I see streetlamps, and feel the booming bass of the clubs underneath my tromping feet, and then, suddenly, I am staring at a naked woman in black heels gyrating her tiny hips in a window edged with red strings of

Christmas lights. Her hair is jet black, and stays in place as she twirls. Her face is saggy, wrinkled. Her mouth is etched in black lipstick, and the glass reflects dozens of her black kisses, from the inside out. As I stand in the middle of this black street, I see a glowering red pulse: the street itself is on fire, but dulled, as if the flesh inside each window cools everything off like a breeze coming through. The women's hips move in angular directions, diagonally, showing off pubic bones, hip bones, long bodies. Each woman has a different hair color, some blue, some orange, some blonde; some women are beautifully peach, others a grey ash. In this red light, the lampposts are too bright, and most have been stoned and broken. The street itself is immaculately clean, no litter anywhere, and when I turn to leave, the redness pulsates and follows me all the way back to my hotel room; the streets are gradually getting darker, lamps turn off, shards of bulbs in the street get closer to the bars and clubs. Just in front of my hotel, I hear retching.

There is a young man, pale, strapped to a desk chair on the curb. Two police officers, one male and one female, lurch forward when he tips the chair over the curb, hitting his nose on the harsh asphalt edge. His nose begins to bleed, this deep magenta- black ooze, and the woman uses her sleeve to wipe it off. She carries a club in her left hand. The teen retches again; it's neon green underneath this pale black sky, and the streetlights are all out now. He's crying. The police officers console him, the male gets down on one knee and shines a blindingly white flashlight beam into this kid's face; his nose looks broken, he says he can't see. I assume he's American; his face, in fact, looks tanned, advancing the severity of his paleness now. The officers finally, after seeing bile course down the curb, untie his arms, and walk away. He stumbles, with great effort, into the stairwell to reenter the club, with its metallic music clanging. I think I should help him, but in a city with legalized psychotropic drugs, I do not know what might happen. Instead, I

head up to my eighth-floor hotel room, close the shutters, and listen to the street sounds. I imagine what that kid will look like in the morning, passed out cold in a clean alley, his beautiful face marred with blood, the sunlight dripping like nectar off his teeth, signaling that he is still alive.

As an adolescent, I loved waking up late and having the sunlight bound across my face, making me warm and safe. In high school, I went with a boyfriend to the Adirondacks to meet his family. They had rented three cottages, and mine was on the lake; through the pines I could witness ducks crash-land into the shallow water, and hear bullfrogs croak at night. One morning, before the sun was entirely up, I heard a knock at my door. It was M. I opened my eyes tentatively, worrying about what I looked like in the dust-blue dawn of a June summer day, the humidity dewing my skin, curling my hair too tight. He crawled into bed next to me, in my single cot, and pulled off my nightgown. We did not exchange a single word. He pulled off his shorts, lay on top of me, naked. The white flimsy curtains lay dormant next to us. I could hear his quick breath as clearly as the lapping waves, and they rocked in blue succession. Unwilling to make love, I lay still, stiff, until the sun began to rise, coming up slowly, yellowed at its tips and spreading softly; the room warmed, M.'s face was wet, his body shaking with oppressive heat and choking breath. The light across his back was one pale table, solid. I lay underneath him, my hands on his thin hips, pushing him away. As quietly as he came in, he left, picking up his clothes, hauling them over one browned shoulder, pushing my creaky door open, then shut. I lay there for hours, as the sun crept upon my face, exposing me to my own body. I did not know how to hold physical love in my hands then, when the sun was so blatant and full.

In Kansas, the sun is a long flat arid desert, one that splays itself across every living thing, and spreads itself so thick it's a molasses that gets into my hair, turns it bright blonde, freckles my long nose. Last summer, my husband and I moved here, and discovered air conditioning, turning it on when the humidity reached almost one-hundred percent, when the heat index soared into the nineties. Home from work late one night, we arrived to find the air conditioner had failed us in the heat wave; our electricity gone out. The sun was going down, a weighted graciousness, a means to cool us off, we reasoned. It fell behind the forest behind our place, and our deck slats cooled and seethed from the break into dusk. We sat at our kitchen island, drinking cold gin and lime juice, until the ice was gone; my husband ran a towel over his sunburnt forehead repeatedly. We lit candles, and embarked into the other, darker, cooler room.

We watched the sun fade from behind all the hills, the temperature dropping only slightly, the trees rustling a bit. The candles cast a new pattern across the walls; shadows leapt, the flames licking up. We could see lights popping back on across the street, one by one, in front and back windows; the artificial lights were neon, bright, fake. By contrast, our neighbors were walking from room to room, shadows and flames following them lightly, giving a pall of effortless yellow to the rooms they inhabited. In this light, Dan's body was twisted rope, a freckled canvas. It was hard to see his face; I took it in my hands, watching him. This light, I could hold.

In the morning, our electricity returned, with cold blasts of vented air. We turned the air conditioner off, left all the windows open. The breeze reconciled our doubts, turning into frenzied wind across the rooms we lived in. The sun rose, baking the deck, the carpet, the cats' backs. It was as bright as a fresh new egg, a feather floating to the ground, weightless. The sunlight put down its bare hands flat on all the counters, splitting beams through the glasses we

had washed but not dried, left in the open air, piercing sunlight into them, into their clear, blue centers, waiting for light to explode, carry them, make them gleam, as if to say this morning, this day, this night, was all right there, flat as a sunbeam, warm as a fire, engulfed in the spires of possibility.

The Flower Shop

“Well,” I shifted my weight from side to side. “I did help with weddings, but rarely with funerals.”

I was standing in front of a round woman named Vickie. She had piercing eyes that glared from under her flaming red hair. She owned the flower shop I was standing in. Vickie slurped her Big Gulp coke, “Melissa, in the back there, also drives, but her baby’s due in March.” She tossed her head towards a swollen, young-looking girl who was eating French fries off a wooden arrangement table. I began writing my contact information down.

“I’ll look this over and get back to you tomorrow,” Vickie said, halfway turned away from me already. The phone rang. She set my papers down next to the cash register. I envisioned them resurfacing sometime in June. “Pat’s Petals, this is Vickie, how can I help you?” she answered into the head-set placed like a headband across her fiery hair, the wire leading to a box on her cushy hip. “Oh hey, Carl! I have all the barbecue sauce made and ready,” I heard her say. She went into the back room. I looked around.

Finding work on a lake in the dead of winter is a bleak possibility at best. I lived on the east side of a lake in upstate New York, but all the shops were on the west side, dilapidated, crumbling, sedentary little buildings that presumably housed crystal-meth laboratories and year-old, forgotten McDonald’s hamburgers. My aunt, who lives in New Hampshire, owned a flower shop during my childhood, and I had learned the basics there over long summer days. So, when I saw the purple “Pat’s Petals” sign on the main road on the western lakeside, I had to go in.

The shop was a disaster. The flowers in the front display cooler had somehow managed not to wilt or mold, but the table set out for wedding planning was overtaken by ribbon, water tubes and deflated balloons that said, “You’re Over the Hill.” The cash register was draped with

yellowed signs, loopy cursive writing, all saying, “There is a \$15 charge for all returned checks.” The curved straw in Vickie’s Big Gulp was dripping fluid onto the buttons of the register.

It was terrible, and I couldn’t wait to work here. I was in graduate school, and I needed the money.

When Vickie called me back, I was elated, until I had the grand tour. The entire, tiny store rocked with chill and ice. She had a space heater going that I tripped over immediately. “Oh,” Vickie said, moving it with her foot. “We have to keep moving this thing because it gets so hot it lights the carpet on fire.” She led me into the bucket room. A white sink stood next to a broken window, looking out at the large backyard full of snow and trash. There were different buckets for flowers of every length, and she reviewed the process of putting roses in hot water, lilies in warm water, tulips and daisies in tepid water. In the bathroom with a cracked toilet, she turned to me and said, “It’s pretty cold in here, so I suggest going before you come.”

Toward the back were three wooden tables set up for arrangements. There were spools of thin and thick ribbon hanging in a pastel knot. “Here,” Vickie said as she tore through some old St. Patrick’s Day ribbon, “is our spray paint, for painting daisies different colors, like for school-spirit days and stuff.” She wiped her nose on her sleeve. She sniffed the air as we made our way to the back cooler. “Hm, what’s that awful smell?” I sniffed, trying not to be rude. The smell had been overpowering from the start of this march through an abyss of rotting flowers and ribbon. It smelled like forgotten meatloaf, half a chicken sandwich, and maybe some vomit. “Oh well,” she said and opened the door to the cooler; it was the only place that didn’t smell terrible.

I love flowers. Ever since I was a little girl, I have been in love with tulips and roses, daffodils and lilies. They remind me of my childhood, when my parents planted lively stalks of

color around their deck, and wind-driven petals stuck to the lawn in spurts of red, pink, and yellow. This was the one place in the shop where I felt at home. The cooler held buckets of shades, colors, and greenery, and it was fresh, water literally dripping off each petal, each stem. I gasped. “We have to clean all this tomorrow, for a funeral,” she said and closed the heavy door.

By the time I had to go, all I could smell was whatever funk had been left in the back room. As I left, Vickie shouted to me, rose in hand, “Oh! Be sure to bring your mittens tomorrow – and dress warm – it’s really cold in here in the morning.”

Mornings were not cold: they were frigid. After a few mornings, while walking around to keep alive and warm, we started noticing small bits of basket on the rug of the front room. Large hunks of candy were bitten out of the teddy bears’ laps. One day when I was out making a delivery, I was forced to leave a lovely and wild arrangement on a woman’s front porch because she wasn’t home. Though I noticed the almost imperceptible mouse bites in the cellophane wrapping covering the flowers, what was worse was leaving them in the twenty-degree cold to die. I was not supposed to do this, simply abandon the living, breathing flora, but the woman’s only neighbor on the lake refused to keep them. I tried to explain the problem to her, an elderly, frail woman with a soap opera blaring in the background. I held the arrangement in my shaking red hands.

“We don’t get along,” she said. “Her husband may have died but I don’t have to bring her the flowers.” She shut the door. I placed the crumbling, wilting arrangement on the widow’s concrete porch; the lake wind whipped and shook the fogging wrapping. The deep purple crocus folded, its yellow stripes hidden. The gleaming pink day lilies shrunk and browned, the stamens collapsing into the hardening petal encasings. The mouse bites were letting the air in too fast. It was as brutal as the neighbor.

When I returned to the store, I found Melissa in a frenzy. “Sam, oh my God, Sam!” She shouted at me when she heard the bell of the front door, “I was washing buckets, and a mouse ran over my feet!” She was huffing loudly through her nose. “Ew,” I said. I can’t say I was surprised, but I was afraid to move any further. “Where did he go?” I asked. She looked behind her, at the floor. “Well, I bet he came in from outside,” I said, connecting Mr. Mouse to all the missing basket pieces and tiny tooth holes in the candy. “It’s okay,” I said, though she was determined to tell Vickie when she returned, who consequently blew up.

“I knew it!” she screamed, as if Melissa birthed the mouse herself. “The candy! Do you know how much those goddamn things cost me?” We shrugged.

Vickie decided to put poisonous traps, kill-traps, in the shop, in the front room, in the teddy bears’ laps, in the bucket room. At first, it worked. We would come in at eight o’clock in the morning, noses in coffee to ignore the pugnacious aroma of rotting meat, and Vickie would scour the rooms and collect three, four, eighteen dead mice in five minutes. “Aha!” I saw her find one once, underneath a deflated latex balloon, “I gotcha, bastard!” she exclaimed. Her cheeks flamed, and the person who called in an order for a daisy bouquet immediately after was treated to a discounted rate. I watched, baby’s breath in hand, in mild disbelief.

One afternoon, after I had successfully delivered flowers to the wrong house, gotten stuck in a blizzard on the side of a very narrow lake road, popped an entire bouquet of balloons for a middle-schooler in the van’s door, and lost much-needed hours to a fifty-four-year-old man named Jimmy, a new hire, a rat ran over Vickie’s foot in the bucket room. It was getting so bad that I was desperately afraid of that place. Vickie called me, Melissa, and Jimmy together to

explain that we were cleaning the store, top to bottom, in preparation for Valentine's Day. I would finally get to do my own arranging, Vickie reassured me, "if you clean."

Jimmy said okay. Jimmy was a fifty-four-year-old, five-foot-three man who was somehow distantly related to Vickie. He had just been released from prison two weeks earlier and needed a job, which Vickie provided. I was scared of Jimmy. He was missing teeth, and all he did was talk about beer, hamburgers, and his old boat. Because of this, I had no hope for him.

Jimmy normally worked the shifts that I didn't, so in the beginning, I rarely saw him. But when Vickie wanted to clean up the ribbon and basket areas, we all worked together. In January, because of the snowstorms, no one ever came into the store, so we felt safe hiding in the back, gagging at the smell.

"Okay, just hold this ribbon steady, there's something underneath it," Jimmy said. He was unraveling a spool of pink ribbon slowly on one of the wooden arrangement tables in the back room, but the ribbon was stuck on something. I cut the ribbon; I felt something come loose and roll onto the part of the wooden tabletop that I couldn't see. "Okay, okay, now cut some more, closer to the spool," he said, urgently. I couldn't see what the rush was; I did not anticipate finding treasure at the end. "I got something," Jimmy said, sweating as he spoke. He began unfurling the ribbon wrapped tightly around something. I thought, at best, it would be someone's missing shoe, or a purse. Maybe, at worst, a rock.

"Oh my God," Jimmy said. I looked over – there was a dead rat wrapped in the stuck ribbon. The smell was overpowering. He came back with gloves. "It's decaying," he said under his breath. I walked away. This rat was about ten inches from where we arranged fresh flowers for funerals and put together bouquets for weddings; it was also where we ate lunch.

Vickie asked Jimmy calmly, as if putting in an order for dinner, to “just take him out to the trash and dump him.” Jimmy took the rat carcass into his gloved hands, and left through the front door.

I sniffed hard. “Uh, Vickie?” I asked, tentatively, “I think there’s another one in here.” I pointed to the fake flowers on the wall opposite the spray paint. I backed away. At this point, there was no way that six dollars an hour was nearly enough for me, who had never even been to prison, to be asked to remove a dead rat from fake flowers. “Damnit,” Vickie said and came over. “Move,” she said and nudged me out of the small space. She began yanking on the fake flowers, pulling ugly carnations and tiger lilies out by the fistful. Jimmy egged her on, “Come on, sis!” He called her sis but, to my knowledge, they weren’t brother and sister. She yanked, sweat beading off her forehead. Finally, she pulled out a bouquet of dull tulips, and the largest rat I have ever seen plopped onto the floor. He looked like an otter. I was mortified, my hand to my mouth. Jimmy clapped.

After we located the last of six dead rats, a whole family, I think, Jimmy began to think we were compadres, partners in grossness. One day, about three weeks later, when Vickie left us alone at the store for an afternoon, he stopped shaving the thorns off the long-stemmed roses and asked me, “Do you know what I went to jail for?” I swallowed. “No,” I said. He leaned into me so far that I could see the spaces between his missing teeth. “It wasn’t my fault,” he said. At this point, I started to get worried and began looking around for signs of customers. Melissa was on bed rest for the remainder of her pregnancy, and it was snowing hard outside.

Jimmy cleared his throat; I grabbed a basket of baby’s breath and started separating the bunches slowly. “I had everything,” he started. “A boat, a wife, a great job...” He trailed off. “Then, one day,” he started whispering, “my young fourteen-year-old niece accused me of not

being good at sex. Yeah, sure we were all out on the boat, us guys and her, and she challenged me, but *she* asked *me*. When it was over, she accused me immediately – I think she set me up.” At this point, Jimmy’s face was flush and Vicki was due back any minute, with her very own fifteen-year-old stepdaughter who would be working with us that day, cleaning buckets. My shock produced complete inaction. I was jealous of the rats. Instead, I nodded, and didn’t ask questions. Suddenly, it made sense, why I was doing all the deliveries to middle schools, bringing single roses to elementary-school teachers during their lunch breaks. He was a registered sex offender, and I was alone with him in a miniscule flower shop.

I was rarely scheduled with Jimmy. I think Vickie noticed my apprehension toward him. I saw her watch me one day consistently leave each room he entered, until she sent me to run her banking errands in the middle of the afternoon. Before I left, she shoved three dollars into my cold hand, saying, “Get yourself a milkshake and take your time. It might snow.” I looked around; the shop was brimming with square bits of sunshine. Behind me, Jimmy’s hands were thick with stems from bunches of new daisies, his face down towards the burnt, spotty carpet.

When March came, Vickie asked me to work a funeral on my own, arranging all the orders and even setting it up at the large funeral home down the road. I was ecstatic and moved; I had passed my makeshift apprenticeship. Vickie never mentioned who the funeral was for, and, though I wondered, I didn’t ask. Daffodils were popping out of the ground in bunches, the sun was shining, and I spun up the funeral home’s long driveway carefully so as to not tip anything. The funeral director, Mark, greeted me at the front entrance. We carried pink and purple arrangements from the van to the lobby. Mark asked me to locate the arrangement for the inside of the casket – it would be an open-casket funeral. “Go ahead and just place it in there –

everything's ready," he said as I walked into the room. I approached the coffin with caution. It was a little girl. She was in a satin dress, her tiny arms crossed over her small torso. I dropped the heart-shaped pillow with roses pinned to it. Her face had been curiously turned away from the room; as I noticed this, Mark walked in. "She was ten," he said. "She had a brain aneurysm." I read about this in the local paper – and here she was. I turned to Mark with the tiny roses in my hand and said, "I can't do this." He nodded, his face expressionless. "Okay," he said. I gingerly set the pillow on the floor, unloaded the rest of the arrangements, and left. People had begun filing into the lobby slowly, and I couldn't help but stare into their pale, pre-spring faces.

The first thing I thought of behind the steering wheel of the van is that one moment when you actually see the tulip start to open in the very early morning sunlight, or close one millimeter at a time in the dull space of dusk. That little girl was ten years old. I envisioned the drawings the little girl might have done, the spelling words she struggled with in third grade. I saw the little girl in her bed, alone at night, dreaming while mice scurried underneath her house, their small claws clicking on the concrete basement floor, moonlight brightening their dim, red eyes.

When I returned to the flower shop, Vickie was gone, running errands. I went outside to pull debris and dead leaves from the bulbs trying to sprout. After a while, I saw Jimmy's rusty car pull into the lot. He spotted me, and came around the side of the store. He knelt down. "How you doing?" he asked me. I hadn't spoken to him since his confession. He leaned closer to me. "I keep having dreams about you," he said to me. "I mean, nothing really bad." His breath was hot and rotten.

He was still kneeling when I walked through the back door and palmed my car keys. I walked through the store, looked at the tipping lilies in their vases, the tall Gerber daisies, their colors blurring into a mass of orange and pink. I started my car and drove away, the tires

spewing parking lot dirt. I thought about Vickie's strong laugh and the chance she took with me. I thought about that little girl, her palms spread across her body, and the flowers I had held moments earlier.

Open & Close

My husband Dan and I get married in the middle of a New Hampshire field at the end of July. My aunt opens the necessary paperwork under a pergola that we have built together, shields her eyes from the sun, and delivers a fast, nervous ceremony of rites. Dan and I hold our hands up together in union and laugh. Our guests, sitting on folding lawn chairs, clap and wave. Days later, we return home to upstate New York, box everything up, close up our bank accounts, and wrap delicate vases in old newspaper. We close the apartment windows in the humid August heat, I clean out the kitchen cabinets, and we pack up our bed to cross the Midwest, somewhere we have never been before, in order to let our new life together bloom. Just two weeks after we wed, we move to Lawrence, Kansas.

We drive for three full days, Dan at the helm of a rented moving truck. I follow behind in our car with the cats. On the final evening, just before sunset, I decide to open the cats' cages and let them roam. One, Itty, immediately gets spooked and lodges herself underneath the break pedal and the clutch. The other, Cow, actually stands on my left shoulder to watch traffic pass. He meows loudly. People in passing cars stare; it's not often that a cat is in a car like this, watching the world go by. Finally, we pull into the parking lot of a Missouri motel for the night. I stuff the cats back into their cages; I am eager for a bed, an open bottle of beer, and a television that will broadcast news in another town.

I love to watch a small town develop on screen: its problems and its celebrations are at a distance. The newscasters are new to me, the maps of the town and its traffic troubles are all foreign yet right outside. The names of streets during this particular broadcast are familiar; they remind us of the streets we walked in Rochester, New York. There was a homicide on a Magnolia Avenue an hour ago; in Rochester, the street with frequent and expected homicide was

Joseph Avenue. I lean back on the headboard, sip beer with Dan, and we watch this new world unfold in front of us, all of it seemingly inconsequential to ours.

On the morning of our last day driving, we pull off I-70 at our exit. The sun is rising and heat is rushing up from the road already. I follow Dan in the moving van all the way to our new apartment, one we have never seen before. It is in a complex with green shutters and brick; I decide I like it. It's home. When we pull around to the back of our unit, there is a gaping hole in the roof. I gasp. The hole is so big. When the landlord meets us to hand over keys, she explains, "Oh yes, there was a fire in that apartment a few weeks ago – someone forgot they had the grill going. No charcoal grills for you guys, but the repairs will be done in about a month. And, it's empty anyway. Here's your place." Relieved, I swallow and walk with her up the stairs of an adjacent building. It's spacious and lovely; real wooden beams are installed in the kitchen. There is a deck with a view of a field and of trees, the green buds fully opened, the wind strong and real.

In the parking lot together, we heave open the moving van's heavy spring-loaded door. It shoots up fast, exposing us to all our belongings. There is the banged-up kitchen table. There is my father's old armchair. There is a painting of Dan's featuring a naked woman. Our own history gleams, waiting for us to welcome it in.

That night, we are starving from hours of opening cardboard boxes and hanging artwork on the walls. We walk all the way to downtown Lawrence, darting across one-way traffic, skimming the hot hoods of cars. When we reach the main street, we realize with disappointment that most restaurants are closed, their neon signs unlit, hanging useless in the windows. We focus our attention on places that look warm and inviting, though they inform us that they are closing at nine o'clock. Finally, we swing open the door to a confusing Greek-and-Italian restaurant,

where I order seafood and hear the swift pop of the cork as the waitress promptly opens a bottle of wine and pours from it a glass that she sets in front of me.

My Kansas mornings involve the town newspaper, which is delivered via our balcony; it comes stuffed in a thin blue plastic bag that our cat Cow plucks his white head into, chancing suffocation. I ease the plastic off him and shake the paper out. Residents I have spoken with have told me that brown recluse spiders like to hide in small, dense, and dark places. Because of this, I look for spiders in the newspaper bags. I find none, mainly because it's not dense or dark in there. But I love opening a newspaper. All the pages smell like musty pine. What I look for are life stories and distant predicaments. I turn from the front page to the comics, then to the advice columns, where people open up their lives for public scrutiny or empathy. I embrace stories of criminals who get caught in silly ways, or dogs that are returned safely to their owners after having wandered aimlessly, amazingly, to a distant state.

In the newspaper, lives are contained, livable, managed, and sometimes balanced. They can be tragic and sad, but then, too, I am watching from so far away that all I need to do is put the horrific story out of my mind and pet a cat. Unlike the lives of my family members, the lives in newspapers are graciously stuffed into columns and inches. There are headlines to let me know what to expect.

On most Sundays, I read the paper before I call anyone in my family, and Dan opens the Sports section to take in scores before calling his dad. As we read, Cow often opens his mouth to yawn, and his tiny pink tongue curls upward toward the sky. I watch him with something like envy; he is closed to the possibility of the bad news splayed across any inky pages.

On the first day that Dan and I receive mail in Kansas, one single piece is waiting for us in the mailbox. I turn the mail key and see a large, egg-white envelope standing upright. Upstairs, in the kitchen, I tear the seam of the envelope with my index finger. As I open it, I watch Dan's face. It is a card from his brother Bert, his wife, and their son. Their New York address – their new first home, a recent, major purchase – is printed on the envelope. On the front of the card is a picture of them crouching down to their son's level on their knees. In the foreground is a basic green chalkboard with the words "Welcome Home!" in white chalk. All three are wide-eyed, laughing with open mouths. Inside, their son has drawn a circle for a heart.

On a bright, autumn Sunday, the afternoon has a fresh, cooling breeze moving slowly through our apartment windows; the phone rings. I have a book opened across my lap. Dan answers on the second ring. I listen to him talk. Dan's voice rises and falls. Afterwards, he tells me it was his brother, Bert, calling from halfway across the country. Bert is scheduled to have open-heart surgery in less than two weeks; this is an urgent decision. He was born with a bicuspid aorta, which caused him to have emergency heart surgery before the first year of his life. The scar tissue has formed a web around his heart capable of producing a fatal aneurism. Left to grow, it will kill him.

The burden of geography rests heavily between Bert and Dan. We are over two-thousand miles from him, in northeast Kansas. We cannot make this distance smaller. We have not much considered the ways in which New York State might beckon us back, bringing with it memories of its open fields and highways, its hills and Concord-grape purple pies that we used to buy from stands on the sides of roads.

When Dan tells me the news, he sits down on the floor next to me. He pauses. I search his face for worry or tension. Finally, he says that he will not go to the hospital to see Bert. He will wait here, next to the phone, for the good news that the surgery has been a success. I am not surprised; Dan has a new job and we have no way to pay for a plane ticket. But I am sick over the suspense and immediacy of bad news. It slams into my afternoon, and it stays there. I teach classes and see Bert in the back of the room. I sleep but not really. I agonize that we should be there; he is Dan's best friend. But whatever leap of faith my agnostic husband is taking, I decide to take it with him.

Two years ago, my father suffered a minor but significant heart attack while in a rehabilitation facility where he was being treated for alcoholism. But, to be honest, the heart attack was a relief: the bad news was over with (the drinking was done, mainly), and the good news was that he was finally with medical professionals. When I received *that* news over the phone, I was relieved. He was getting treatment and he was being medically monitored. And he was going to live. That news, I could stomach. But Bert's news hung in the air at every meal, his heart and his life resting in the branches of all those trees behind our deck every evening. I watched those limbs until it grew dark most nights until the surgery.

The winter before my father's heart attack, Dan and I stood at our tiny apartment window watching a blizzard attack upstate New York. As I cracked open a bottle of wine, Dan answered the phone. It was his mother, who that afternoon had learned of her stage-one ovarian cancer. Stage one was a gift. Soon, she would have a hysterectomy, a feminine carving away of sorts; it was a scooping away of the insides to save a life. But before the surgery that saved her, Dan

kissed me goodbye and drove away along the icy streets that narrowed and closed in the snow to nurse a woman whose cysts were gripping her like a metal clamp.

A week before Bert's surgery, Dan and I realize that seasons in Kansas are slower. Over dinner, we talk about the New York weather Bert must be experiencing – it is cold, snow is on the nightly-news forecast, and the chill of an afternoon is expected. In Kansas, the seasons seem longer; these few last days have swelled with heat and the combustible humidity of gathering thunderstorms. I have been waiting for a cold, dark autumn with gardens yielding gourds the size of my head underneath all those green, sturdy leaves. At night, we gather the cats and watch the quick development of heat lightning. Hail is a new development in our lives; it falls so heavy on the deck and on our car. It makes dents. We are used to the cold, dark afternoons and the rainy way that autumn winds into a New York September. Here, flowers are still open, bright along the brick streets. It will take us time to accept these changes.

On the morning that Bert goes in for surgery, Dan and I sit in the kitchen, reading the newspaper. Bert's wife calls twice, bawling. We listen to her sob. She is afraid. Bert has already been sedated, and Dan sits on the edge of the bed, where he will stay, with the phone in his lap, for hours.

I picture my brother-in-law on the operating table. By now, the leaves have turned. The streets are flush with orange and red, and leaves bump and float into the hospital windows. Inside, Bert's wife will imagine the surgeon's fine two hands, his steady grip on the tools that are lined up so neatly next to her husband's body. The surgeon will make a series of incisions, and he will part layers of skin and flesh to open his chest. They will have to stop the heart; it must

momentarily rest before the surgery starts. As the engine of Bert's body, it needs a breath before enduring this type of trauma. Everything stops; machines pause, the heart rejuvenates.

Finally, Bert's heart will pulse and pump. The scar tissue will be removed in precise particles with delicate tools. The heart will lie flat. Eventually, the heart and the skin and the flesh and the chest will be sewn and sutured, closed. My brother-in-law will wake up hungry and slow, unaware. His eyes will open at the bright hospital light, the prescribed aneurism a safely closed door. His wife will peer intently at him; his heart will pump like mad. The world, again, will be an open door.

Weeks later, when Bert calls, his voice is stronger, clearer. His voice is a map that shortens the distance between us. He wants to relay what he's doing tonight; he wants us to stand in his kitchen and feel the October chill moving through his windows. His mother and father are there. He says that they are carving a Halloween pumpkin with his son, whom we can hear babbling in the background. We hear him help Bert pull the top off the gourd. For his son, it is very heavy. Bert drops the phone – a pause, and a laugh. When he returns to us, he says that they are taking turns sticking their hands in, getting the goop out. They plan to roast the seeds they can salvage and pry from the orange pulp. Bert's son puts his own small hands into the large opening and shrieks. Everyone pulls seeds from the orange bulk, and they open their mouths to eat them.

Section Three
Circles and Spheres.

My Father Figure

Ralph Waldo Emerson could never have been my father, but he is a mentor, my father figure. He toured my house and took note of the ways in which it was shut down, shut in, shuttered with darkness. He witnessed the fuchsia petals of the hydrangeas on the top of our small crested backyard hill, and he laughed at how far removed we were from them. He saw the tetherball in the side yard, rusted and broken with use. He saw the swimming pool, gone, and the chimney, cracked, and he felt a fleeting sorrow for me and my family. Emerson was not a warm man – like mine, hugs were infrequent, isolation was needed, walks were often taken alone. But unlike my father, sobriety was key, thought was pivotal, and everyone at Emerson's long dinner table had her fair share of commentary. At the table, thinking now what I would say to him: too daunting. I would smile and nod, stay away from the wine, and I would ask him to take me in. He wouldn't, and rightly so, but he would urge me to think on my own, rely less on my father to get me through the tough times. He would not tell me what to think and he would not ask what I thought: he would watch me form sentences, swirling in my small blonde head, and finally, when I was ready, he would lean in close and listen.

Emerson Speaks

I. Envy is ignorance, [...] imitation is suicide...The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which we can do, nor does he know until he has tried – Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance”

On looking back at Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essays, his sense of self-awareness is staunch, unflinching. His essaying, compromised by his large and unfettered awe of the natural world around him, moves me toward a soft light during evening, a moonlit stroll across and through lines, offering blank space, his universe. Emerson, with his deep conscience and obligation to his sense of self, comprises simplicity and at times, prideful vantage points from which no one can entirely reach him. When you open a book of his essays, the dust flies off the pages, startled; all the floating sunlit particles serve as a reminder that he dwells in each breath, and gives gravity, space, and constitution to each airy spec of grey matter. This is to say, of course, that Emerson surrounds me, and when read, he totals me into a pile of ash, something to be swept into a dustbin, left for reflection, gathering a slow, new body.

To believe your own thought, to believe what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men – that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense – “Self-Reliance”

An only child holds this thought dear to her, and clutches to her private heart like a bottle. When I was four, my father began lying to me. He told me that ice cream came straight out of cows’ udders, and that I was going to have a brother one day. Aside from having a brother-in-law, none of his truths were reliable. Instead, to cope, I began to take the world as a very literal place. And, without formal religious ceremony holding my spine up every Sunday morning, the virtues I came to were my own. At an early age, I decided that loneliness was a consequence of apathy; no one in the world should suffer. I literalized love. If people were physically present in my life, I felt loved. No matter if they were making fun of or using me – they were there, touchable. Reductively, my conscious ideals rose with quickening paces; my friends saw a drastic

change in my investment in their lives. The earth's remote spaces of desert and mote were universal examples of despair: if a lizard crawled across a scaly, dried creek bed, the only way to save him was to give him a companion. I spread this to everyone in the fourth grade, earnestly and with universal zest. But my behavior wasn't to be Emerson's universal truth in action. I was to develop a sense of insecurity unless blanketed by affection. Anything that I could literally see or smell existed for me. Only later, in college, when my father began dangerously to unravel did I search for the intangible, the resolve in the unknown, the flashes of a transcendental reality.

In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty – “Self-Reliance”

I like to picture Emerson walking on Walden Pond, candle light and oil lamps flooding the rustic living room of a cabin he approaches. A hand, Thoreau's, wraps around an inky pen. I imagine Emerson's rap on the wooden oak door is brutishly quiet, a solacing knock of a certain someone. The internal dim of Thoreau and Emerson, their eyes meeting across a table, signifies trust, and dislocation. Emerson wrote alone, walked less than his dear friend Thoreau, and debated words with endless trepidation that each one was wrong. His essay “Self-Reliance” dictates tremendous steps of earnest recovery, uses double-takes without repetition of actual words, conceptual metaphors leaping and bounding like small children, white spaces separating paragraphs. Emerson had the ability to reject a thought, take a breath, return to it, and believe in each step of it with his entire mode of being.

Most writers write alone. Emerson, I imagine, watched trees rustle out his library window while composing, relying as little as possible on the events of the household, the women moving through it, to assuage his guilty conscience for writing “Self-Reliance.” Marred with a family, he had to deal with the emotions of others. His words boldly declare that they are to be taken as cold tablets in stone, second to one's own.

I came upon his essay again as one walking across a weighty bridge in a thick gust of wind: holding on was one thing, but moving across, to the other side, my life was turned anew. With little hesitation, Emerson's sensibility of self, his reliance upon the ideals one sets for oneself, were possible because they cannot be exact. His efforts at self-reliance move toward the quiet understanding that a belief is transient if we grasp too tightly to it, and when released, the wind gusts it forward, and back to us later. I used him when I was adrift in my father's madness, and when I was charged with supporting my mother through her terrible divorce. Somewhere in between them, I was charged with finding my own, resolute self, which was necessary.

Writing is a solitary experience, one of severe self-reliance. In winter, the ice flaps against the panes, and the light behind me collides with the cat's fierce eyes, and I know that things are in the order they appear to be, and that I fit here. I must trust myself enough to balance between fact and memory. When this happens, and the pen moves in my small hand, the only connectivity I experience is that with the memory itself: what words will come to me and channel that grey sofa my mother loved so much? What color can describe the kitchen tiles underneath my grandmother's feet on a summer night, a kitchen full of nectarines and buttered bread? What words will suffice when Emerson tucks himself in at the close of his essay, saying quietly to me, "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string?" Some nights, my heart vibrates to *an* iron string, his iron strong, the wind's iron string, yet I remain in awe, silenced by the genius of someone else's words, predictions, or self-assurances. On those days, the reflection that appears in the mirror is not quite mine.

It seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on your memory alone, scarcely even in acts of pure memory, but to bring the past for judgment into the thousand-eyes present, and live ever in a new day – "Self-Reliance"

When I am young, my mother tells me that I never knew my real grandfather because he fell through ice on Lyme Square's ice skating pond. I picture his bright red face, his mouth a big O as he plummets under the cold sheets, thick with layers of white death. The memory of it scares me away from friends' backyard skate parties, the ponds icy in their stillness and frothy tops cut from their slick skate blades. She tells me the memory with confidence, in a hushed, adult tone. I look at her face, her blue eyes, her furrowed brow. I treasure this memory, as she makes me her confidant in a swarm of yellow kitchen light on a Wednesday afternoon, home from work.

Later, in the kitchen in late afternoon, she makes a stew to welcome me home from college. The autumnal seasonings mellow the tongue, the scent as light as chive and navy beans. We hold wine glasses similarly, right hands around the thickest part, snug into our soft palms. Casually, we discuss my father's drinking, and she says, "I grew up with it, I should have known," and I halt in the crisp cider sip of white wine. I look to her, tilt my head in question. "Your grandfather," she says, "he died from it." I turn to face her, "What?"

"Yeah," she says, stirring. "He drank himself to death when I was six. Went into a coma. He was twenty-six."

I ask her, plead with her, to make this false. "But," I stutter, "You told me that he fell into a pond ice skating."

She looks to me, sadness across her stolid, weary face. "No," she says, as if I have made it up.

Soon, Emerson takes me by the elbow, whispers to me at the dining room table: *None of this is actual fact.*

Emerson, I imagine, would tell me this was a burial of the suspended truth. My grandfather's drinking, in corners of half-days on half-accounted truths, is something no one can know for sure. The way beer tasted to his masculine lips, the clutch of a vodka bottle in his hand: what could we know about it? We are all trying to account for the same man's memories. Best, Emerson says, not to. Best, he says, to watch the clouds for their ground cover at dusk, the geese flapping south for the winter. We depend upon these things to be present, capable, able to see the livable minute. Each memory, in its purist way, is a source of sorrow and attendance not to what happened, but more so what we wanted to have happen: a new day can elicit a memory more than a memory can script a day.

Recently, Emerson returned to me in the dark, a foreboding presence. I was drinking a glass of white zinfandel, a horrible, syrupy pink wine that my mother-in-law had left behind from a visit. I put the wine down to hear Emerson whisper something about the transcendence of stability, and how it's not true. He said, *put down the wine*. The phone rang, so I did.

The caller happened to be my father, recounting to me some new facts about his life. He confessed that he was never diagnosed as a manic depressive; he made it up, shifted his own reality to hide his narcissistic personality disorder. He kept repeating, "pathological," "insidious," "never killed anybody," and "sociopath."

My father was silent after a bit. I searched the room for Emerson's breath, a word, a cough. Nothing but his sentiment – nothing is stable. I made the choice to listen to my father detail his new illness. "Devastating," is how he put it. Emerson's ear was pressed to the phone, waiting for a sense of solace in transience. When I hung up the phone, it came in a wave – a splash of wine down the sink, sorrow in the heart, the unstable parent at my door again.

At the end of “Self-Reliance,” I listen now for the way Emerson must have scratched that ink into the paper, writing:

These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones [...] There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence. Before a leaf-bud has burst, its whole life acts [...] But man postpones or remembers.

I hear the last breath of my grandfather, contained in the ice, the pond water, the reedy last sip of gin. I suppress my father’s rages from my childhood, his loud and louder voice. All of it, liquid memory, slips between my fingers.

II. *Every moment instructs, and every object; for wisdom is infused into every form. It has been poured into us as blood; it convulsed us as pain; it slid into us as pleasure; it enveloped us into dull, melancholy days, or in days of cheerful labor; we did not guess its essence until after a long time – “Nature”*

The house I grew up in had a creek running straight through the sloped front yard. It was the first house on the new cul-de-sac, a bright white shingled two-story box with a huge *I* nailed in black. A path of rainwater embedded itself in the grass and mulled new dirt from the hill in the backyard with no trees, and eventually, the tiny stream of water etched itself its own smooth path. By first grade, sediment and rock had begun to erode the bed; it became a working, functional body of water that polled out into the grey gutter.

When I was bored or restless, or lonely, I waded in the tiny mess of mud, and watched sunlight glint off the ore and dull limestone deposits. I loved to break the flinty rocks into two, and three, and watch their layers separate like pieces of soft chalk. They made no sound hitting the creek bed whatsoever. No cars at that time came across the bridge next to the house, and I could hear myself breathing deeply into the ground. I began to pluck rocks daily and stuff them into my pockets, later to be washed in solitude in the upstairs bathroom sink, and displayed on my dresser, next to my jewelry box. I am sure my mother noticed, but she didn’t say a word. I’m unsure if my father saw them.

Eventually, it became a silent ritual, and I would drop my school bag and run to the flowing, wandering creek. I began looking for emerald and ruby rocks, to no avail. But finally, one afternoon with the sky above me like smoky charcoal, I sifted through the mediocre granite pieces and picked out a sharp, orange, reddish-yellow arrowhead. It was chiseled, pointing toward the sky, removed from the rest. I handled it like a diamond, and watched it sit in my youthful palm as it rained down on us. As an only child, I tended to give natural objects physical and emotive selves, and now was no different. The rock was a friend, an instructor of the past.

At Show-and-Tell, the arrowhead inspired my teacher to instruct the class about Native Americans, their battles, and their traditions. I pictured the palms that encased the humble stone, the men who had lifted it to the sunny sky in some sort of victory. I began to see the land that my house resided on as an immense, historical field. Tiger lilies and battles grew here, and both were torn to shreds in hot fissures of daylight. That was easy to picture: the inside of our home was its own verbal battlefield, with word-spears and wine-fists, opposing sides with heaving breasts. The arrowhead, a perfectly crafted piece of some other place and some other life, resided inside my treasured jewelry box, and has traveled with me since. In my creek-bed development of history and life, this piece of the earth is nostalgic, an effortless placeholder of untold memory, of the instructions from history that we invent. Among the personal artifacts that I keep (a cubic zirconium ring, an amethyst rock), the arrowhead belies my own truth: *I found you.*

Emerson's "Nature" encompasses an almost impossible artillery of conceptual metaphors, though he wraps them around the precise premise that every single object is a tool for instruction. The creek bed was as close to a sibling or combatant of childhood loneliness that I had growing up; the arrowhead solidified this experience. I seem to be looking for the real

“things” with which to jar memory from: after an actual object is identified, the conceptual elements arrive with a bit more ease. Or, in another sense, once the memory is realized, the tangibles must arrive to prove its reality. To demonstrate:

a black-and-white skunk stone is my parents fighting and a glass breaking in the kitchen.

A glass fish with long fins is my father giving me a bribe because my mother left after a fight.

My red Converse high-tops are my father finally understanding me at age thirteen.

Bob Dylan’s album *Blonde on Blonde* is my ticket out, my teenage rebellion.

Emerson furthers this point in “Experience” by writing, “I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world *I think*. I observe that difference, and shall observe it. One day, I shall know the value and law of this discrepancy.” The value of this discrepancy is the exact and the figurative, much like an event in real time and its recollection in memory. What we see and what we reflect later are different entities, though I often combine them, let them sniff one another playfully, and take away what’s left of their transient and convergent meaning.

III. *Every end is a beginning; [...] there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens* – “Circles”

Emerson was ambitious to endeavor an essay about circles. It is human nature to attempt to arrive full circle toward the meaning of an experience. Emerson seems satisfied with the implication that to look at a circle or a circular meaning is wonderful and rich, full of potential and relief. However, the world operates on arcs and loops, ovals stuffed with possibility and danger. Emerson’s way around this is to write, “The universe is fluid and volatile.” It is. His universals throughout the circular patterns of “Circles” attempt a fluidity that cannot be tidy or precise. The radius of a circle, the points leading from one rounded edge across to the other, are what matter to me most – that brutal marrow of how: how we got here, how we will leave here.

The bone-dripping material is what I must account for in my own life. Volatility and movement are what cause me to stop, address a moment, and reflect.

Everything looks permanent until its secret is known – “Circles”

Growing up as an only child, I believed in my family and in truthfulness. I was always making personal and independent meanings out of instances, layering facts with memories to recall past experiences; I had no siblings that could offer any other recollection, and my mother and father rarely talked about the past. As it was, I met my paternal grandmother only once, and am unsure today if she is alive, though my father recently lived in her house. Under the unsure circumstances of my father's past employment, I have grown up living in a murky sense of truth: what I see is almost never what it seems, as the cliché goes, and once a secret is revealed, the entire circle that rotated around it changes in depth and dimension.

The summer before I started teaching at local colleges, I worked in a children's library in my hometown in upstate New York. My father would often stop in, dressed business casual, like someone would who worked as a computer consultant for IBM, which is what my mother and I believed he was doing for a living. One rainy evening, the humidity causing the little, yellow-trimmed windows to steam in the Reading Room, my father found me shelving books on my knees. After greeting me, he told me he was on his way home to take a conference call. I noticed his hands were shaking, and thought it was strange. Normally, he was very self-assured, charismatic, and confident. He walked away, and I saw that he was wearing shorts. Not an insignificant detail: in July, though upstate New York is humid, most businesses and corporations do not approve of shorts at the workplace, and he claimed to have come directly from the office. I watched him walk away.

I called his office work number from my desk, and got a busy signal. Oddly, my mother had the same hunch. She called the number and got a disconnected notice. After going through the basement and his computer when he told my mother he was “going into work for a few hours” on a Saturday morning, she found files indicating that he had not filed taxes in three years, and he was gambling away their mutual savings account. After a trip to the bank, my mother was greeted emphatically by the teller, who said, “We’re so happy to see you up and moving. Craig said you were pretty sick.” After my mother’s confused glare, she was informed that my father had been removing, dollar by dollar, everything from her retirement and savings accounts, claiming she was afflicted by cancer and was dying. She had less than one hundred dollars to her name.

Secrets are demonic but the lies that cover them are worse. When I attempt to tell the story of my father, the doors close. In procession, the story of my father has turned epic, as most things of this size do. Further, I cannot wrap this full circle: my father continues to admit to more lying, more mental disease, more instability. There is no ending. I relax when Emerson points to his own struggle with circles, the way midnight cannot halt time, and everything moves forward, and everything that turns to dawn is always turning to dusk. What we capsule, and encase, and make meaning of, must remain in some sense of past, moving in its own path, and stopping. At some point, I reason, my father has to stop.

IV. *The world rolls: the circumstances vary, every hour* – “Love”

Stability is a thing of beauty. It is also a moment. As humans, we want badly to connect. We roll forward with the past collected in our minds, and we try to deal with what we can. Emerson’s writing has become a sibling to me, and Emerson himself a kind father, comforting in his pages.

Two years ago, I sat in my favorite, old red leather chair in my city apartment, waiting every hour for my father to call. His house was foreclosed upon, and he was evicted. My mother had left for New Hampshire. My father was sleeping on the wooden floor; my mom had left him the dog. I could not commit to committing my father, at least not yet. The phone rang until two in the morning, and then it stopped. There was such comfort in the silence that I began to remember things, real, tangible, circular things about my father: his laugh, his love of jazz. The swing set he put in when we didn't even have grass underneath in our brand new backyard. Sundays when we went for chocolate chip ice cream, Sundays when we ate steaming stew and watched the fire spread to all the drying logs. I began to remember him in moments.

In the morning, he called me once more. He reported that he cleaned the place, and left for Minnesota, where he's been ever since. This saga has no ending, but its beginning is murky too. My father, Emerson, and myself – we all exist in our own lived experiences, circular or otherwise, rallying against wind and muddled memory, trying as best we can to get at something. We are reaching to understand moments, or to reign them in, to make them clearer, trying to see the roses in one bright instant, buds as tight and beautiful as any day, an unfurling.

Teaching the Self to Speak

I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds. What would we really know the meaning of? – Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 1837

I.

The common and the low are often inroads for me when I walk into a classroom for the first time. My students at the University of Kansas always respond well to Nancy Mairs’s essay “On Being a Cripple.” Every semester, no matter what courses I am teaching, they open themselves to her disease and to her perspective. General responses vary, but they are always peppered with the same underlying element: Nancy does not feel sorry for herself. She has Muscular Sclerosis, but she appreciates the disease, she is grounded, and she celebrates those around her. She thinks it’s funny when she falls.

I use this essay to get a dialogue going with my students about how we move through our days. Whom do we talk to? Whom do we admire? Whom do we neglect and what are we afraid of? These questions often make students uncomfortable, which is excellent, because then I can begin to know them.

I ask my students to research their own actions for a week. They look at me as if this is the easiest assignment in the world. A week later, discoveries abound. This semester, one discovered he was in love with his best friend. Another told her mother she did not want to be pre-med. Yet another realized he needed help because he smoked marijuana every single morning, afternoon, and evening. The self-discovery inhered to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s tactic for living, which he expressed during his “The American Scholar” oratory; the common and the low provide insight and help us think critically. The present is its own eye to the future, as the pre-med student knew, and the present is also an eye for the past, as the drug-addled student saw.

Equipped with the basic foundation of the active self, as Emerson saw it and as I try to teach it, we can engage with analysis, critical inquiry, and self-awareness; in short, we can risk enough to let ourselves fall.

II.

I began teaching straight out of a Master's program. I had little teaching experience, and I was terrified of a class in Rochester, New York, that I had been assigned to at an urban community college. The students were mostly non-traditional; some came with rap sheets, convictions, addictions, or bosses breathing down their necks to finally get an Associate's degree and move on with their lives. The first day, I walked through security and into my classroom, shaking. Two men in the back, both in their mid-forties, talked about a murder I had read about in the local newspaper. "Yeah, that was my uncle," one lamented. As I approached the front of the room, I felt eyes on me. "Yo, that's the *teacher*?" one beautiful female student asked her friend beside her. Her friend shook her head, "Uh-uh, no way, this is gonna be *easy*."

I sat on the desk and trembled. When I called roll, I suffered through their last names. I explained where I came from (a suburb close by), where I went to school (two state schools, one of which some expressed a desire to attend), and that I liked cats (most laughed and looked at me disparagingly). I also told them that I was married. Next, I asked them to tell me a bit about themselves, one by one. Most made a point to say they could not read well, or write "worth a damn," and almost everyone told me where they lived, which was unusual. The level of trust was palpable. At the state universities where I also taught, I was accustomed to majors named, or where people were from, but never addresses.

When we got to Mark, a man in his fifties, he said that he was a recovering addict, that no one in the room would ever be able to understand him because of it, and that I was too young to teach him anything. I replied by saying that I had an alcoholic father who was homeless at the time. “He may very well show up here,” I said. There was silence.

As the semester wore on, I began to notice that not many community college students were referring to the textbook readings during in-class writing exercises. The readings featured essays by Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, E.B. White, and Scott Russell Sanders, whom I thought everyone would love. But when I asked the class to write about these essays, I would read, “I have never even been canoeing. I could not relate to this at all,” or “I know what Thoreau means about walking, but it just isn’t practical for me in a dangerous city.” I knew they were telling the truth; I had simply overlooked their circumstances.

I brought in memoirs that I thought they might relate to. I excerpted Lizzie Simon’s *Detour*, where she loses her mind in the beginning. I brought in Brad Land’s *Goat*, and a few students wrote about what it’s like to actually feel one’s face getting bashed in during a fight. “Use that detail,” I found myself writing in the margin, “tell us what that feels like.” When a student disclosed that she was in the process of deciding whether to abort or keep her baby, I brought in Mary Clearman Blew’s essay, “The Unwanted Child” (the student, like Mary, kept the baby). When many expressed woes of addiction, I added Maureen Stanton’s essay “Zion” to the mix, and the students waged a discussion in class about feelings of loss and death, and what it means to be the one left behind.

When the students had a newer, more up-to-date version of life events to read, they started responding more to writers like Thoreau, Emerson, and White. They grew in confidence; they started to open up about their own lives in their papers, and they began to question the lives

of those they read about. It gave hope to Emerson's basic ideal that "Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this." It wasn't that the older essays weren't working, I slowly discovered; it was that, without an updated trajectory of possibility, without a path to today, those texts withered in a vacuum. With new essays of similar topics, the students started to see what I saw: the possibility that their own voices and their own writing wasn't just good, but also necessary. "One day," I said at the close of a particularly good discussion about American social norms, "I will read your work in a book." No one laughed.

"The human mind can be fed by any knowledge," Emerson says near the middle of "The American Scholar," and "the discerning will read [...] only the authentic utterances." As an undergraduate, I believed that there was good and bad knowledge, that what I learned in books was more important than what I learned or at home or among friends. This was before my father became ill and challenged all that. So, when I received a call late one Friday night from the county prison, collect, and was asked if I would accept the charges, I said yes.

The man's slurred voice sounded a bit like a student from my community college class, Jon, who was trying to kick a heroin habit with methadone. I couldn't hear him at all, and I wondered if it could also be an ex-boyfriend. I kept saying "What?" into the phone until he hung up. I was useless.

On Tuesday, Jon came to my office hours to apologize for calling me from jail. He told me that the methadone, and his location, contributed to his being arrested. He slurred, but I knew he was trying to get well. As he talked about the class, he started to draft his final essay. "I want to write about recovery," he said. I nodded. "I want," he said, swaying, "to define for people what it is like to be an addict, and not have them think it's the same for everyone." I thought

back to my father, and his recent episodes of showing up, manic and drunk, outside my apartment. I thought back to Emerson's words, "I learn immediately from any speaker how much he has already lived, through the poverty or the splendor of his speech."

"Yes," I said into Jon's bloodshot eyes, "write that. It matters."

III.

In his speech, Emerson comes close to detailing the pedagogy that too often gets lost in a classroom, be it rural, urban, or somewhere in-between. He says that "Life is our dictionary." Now, when I teach, I ask my students to write a self-definition in the beginning of the semester; I call this Unit Paper I. At the end of the semester, I have them re-write their definitions; I call this teaching. They realize that by reading – advertisements, textbook excerpts, subtitles on foreign films – they have the command of information. To hold the world is to believe it's ours to define. And, Emerson pushes this further when he also declares, "Only so much do I know, as I have lived." This is not the credo of the memoirist alone; this is the necessity of an earned self-discovery that causes reflection, critical thinking, and analysis. The students that fail my classes are the ones who believe there is a Life Dictionary and they just haven't located it yet, as if it's a secret that comes with a diploma. The students who pass my class, and move forward, are the ones that don't simply tell stories; they listen with language to what their lives mean.

IV.

By the end of the semester at the community college, my students were staying behind and asking me questions about my life. They asked me when I last saw my father (days ago, I think, in the park), how many siblings I had (none, just a dog), if they should go to a four-year college (yes, but only if you know what that means to you). They asked me where I met my

husband (in graduate school) and had I dated much before (yes, and one ex-boyfriend once tried to kill me). Often, I got wide-eyed looks, but no one was incredulous, mainly because possibilities existed beyond the scope of one life. As Emerson said, “The drop is a small ocean.” I told my class this, and gestured with my hands one cold afternoon, “You guys,” I said, “we’re all drops.” They stared at me, and one laughed. “Sam,” she said, “*You* might be. But *I* am a puddle.”

The puddles all passed the class. It was my final semester in New York; I told them on the last day, as they handed in their final papers, that I was moving to Kansas. “Kansas?” they cried. “For what?” I told them I was leaving for graduate school, which was true. I told them I was leaving because I knew there were other things out there for me. I told them I knew that it was true because I witnessed them open in the classroom. “A lot of you couldn’t really read when we started,” I said, “and now look at what you can do.” Most were headed to more classes. A few were transferring to four-year schools. A student in the back said he was through with school, “but I won’t ever stop learning,” he said in closing.

I thought back to Emerson and all the earnest people listening to him in their seats. I sat back and thought about what he said near the opening of his speech, a risky moment, “To the young mind, every thing is individual, stands by itself. By and by, it finds how to join two things, and see in them one nature; then three, then three thousand [...] whereby contrary and remote things cohere.” I reconciled with my father and Jon kicked his heroin habit. Mark called his daughter; it was the conclusion to his final paper. “I didn’t think I would ever learn anything from a woman my own daughter’s age,” he wrote, “but because she shared her life with me, I want to share mine again with my daughter.”

V.

Today, in Kansas, most of my students express ideas through their lived, human experiences. Gradually, they find the authority to be themselves, the authority to question what they know, and finally, slowly, they place themselves as authentic, thinking selves among the universe. And like all good students, they embody that which Emerson so boldly told his eager audience: “Colleges and books only copy the language which the field and the work-yard made.”

A Mother's Memoir

*What I want to say, Linda,
is that there is nothing in your body that lies.
All that is new is telling the truth.*

– Anne Sexton, “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman”

After my mother left my father and moved back to New Hampshire, I began to send her what I thought was empowering literature: Susan Sontag excerpts, Nancy Mairs, Barbara Robinette Moss, Connie May Fowler – female writers who endured physical and mental anguish, and who succeeded nonetheless. We would discuss the texts, especially the memoirs detailing women getting out of abusive relationships, and my mother's voice would lilt with a bit of pride for acknowledging that she now belonged to that club. I was proud of her, but wary. It happened so fast, and she remained stuck on the details of my father, who is a chronic and joyful liar. So, when I was in graduate school and read Lauren Slater's memoir *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*, I knew I had to ship the book halfway across the country to my mother.

In the memoir, Slater attempts to piece together unstable memories, recovery from abuse and disease, and she ekes out a way for memory to help recreate personal histories, possibly to escape memories too painful to stare at directly. I sent my mother a copy of Slater's book thinking that she would relish the psychology of painful, unstable memories – this mimicked what my mother and I were going through as my father was being shuttled from one mental facility to the next, all the while lying to us about the details. I sent it off on a sunny day with a simple note, “I hope you like it! Let me know!” I ended the note with a smiley-face.

My mother sent Slater's book back to me, something she never does. In it, in the margins, she had marked the passages she particularly hated. In the first, I was jarred by the sight of her cursive writing, its graceful penmanship stuffed into the small space. Slater discusses how

epilepsy feels. “It begins beautifully,” she writes, “and with only slight pain.” In the margin, my mother wrote, “Samantha? Migraine?” She was wrong. Migraines begin with a total numbing, like the dulled emotions of post-traumatic-stress-disorder, and the panic of intense pain comes quickly. But more stirring to me was the oversight of the pain that my own mother encountered with my father that mimicked this same epileptic charge. They began as a beautiful, painless couple, with only a few passes of fright or harm on my father’s part, yet the pain directed my mother back to me instead of back toward herself.

In another passage, Slater writes about the passion her mother had for Slater’s figure-skating career. Her mother made her train rigorously, writing about her mother issuing her to “‘Leap now [...] with your toe turned out,’ and I did it, even when my lungs burned and my lips lost all their moisture; I did it until I went far away, far away to someplace silver, and beyond pain.” Next to this, my mother wrote, “Really?” I was stunned. She placed me in ballet when I was three, allowed me to enter competitions when I was seven, drove me to performances across New York State and Canada. But this wasn’t the rub. It was the stress inherent in our family dynamic that my mother was refusing to see. Anything my father taught me held a strict pattern: do it right or get yelled at. My father never hit me, but his words came close. And he eventually hit my mother, who fell into a dark, deep hole of depression, moving into a place beyond pain.

In her book, Slater relays her doctor offering an explanation for her seizures. He tells her, “‘Oftentimes a seizure comes after a period of stress – ’”

There is nothing from my mother next to this particular passage.

My mother moved slowly from denial into regret, and even more slowly into anger – this occurred only when she left my father after thirty-four years. When she was far enough away

from my father, my mother erected two life choices. One was to relish her freedom, and the other was to mine my father's life to uncover all his lies.

Slater has a passage in her book: "Sometimes, you just hit your limit. That was it. I stormed out of the barn. I crashed through people and maybe even tipped a table or two, but hardly anyone noticed because the music had started up again, and people were dancing." In the margins, my mother had written: "This didn't happen." I wonder if, as she read this, she felt envy or regret first. She often laments that she left too late, that permanent depression and damage were done to her that she cannot undo, no matter that she fell in love again later on, or that she reprised her tennis games and family barbecues in ways she once only dreamed of doing. I know she wanted to tip over the table before my father had his penultimate breakdown, because he once again drew all the attention to his wreckage and left my mother in the passenger seat, shuddering alone.

My mother urges me to write our family's history, which I tell her I am doing. She admits to keeping journals because she yearns to write her own memoir. I encourage her to write every time she raises the idea and she muses. Yet, in re-reading Slater's book, I notice another marginal comment from my mother. Slater describes her own process of writing, "I was a sorcerer, my spell a mix of clattering consonants, my language a series of links that could close any chasm. Complete." My mother's comment, large in the white space: "Nuts!" I am incredibly saddened when I read this. She believes that my father's mental illnesses have forever prevented her own closure. Unlike Anne Sexton, she distrusts her own body to remember her own life. She has, in effect, disempowered herself, giving my father the final say in sewing her own past shut.

In Slater's book, I discover what she and my mother share: auras. When my mother has an emotional aura, she believes it is a premonition about a life event, and usually it is a negative

one. It is a piece of her deep depression that haunts her – she can see only the black side of impending, yellow sorrow, and it overtakes her senses, rendering her stuck in a sea of terrible yellow sights and smells. Slater details a physical aura: “involuntary recall, or as some neurologists have named it, nostalgic incontinence. It happens, doctors say, because temporal areas of the brain get stimulated from pre-seizure firings, and a door opens, and through it pours the past.” I do not believe her, really, but I love the idea. Slater is looking for a portal in which to channel her memories, to see them new, to have a semi-conscious vision of her past. My mother and I both have a bank of lost memories because of self-protection. Before my father’s final breakdown, he followed us everywhere, so we could not even confer in a public restaurant about the abuses we were suffering. I also have painful memories locked tightly away, hidden, because of my father’s rages. In the margin next to the aura passage, my mother has taken up considerable space: “She makes it easy to pick her illness and make it pretty,” she writes. I gasp, looking at it now. This is exactly what my father did after she divorced him, and it is not that she notices this that troubles me. It is that her defiance is still pinned to Slater, trying to account for a confused, ill battery of mismatched memories. In Slater, my mother sees my father, and thus charges her to come clean with the truth. But, I wonder, whose truth? His? Mine? My mother’s? These are three separate truths, three jigsaw puzzles with missing pieces.

In Slater’s pages, I see my mother’s pain and rage come alive. Where Slater writes, “even those things that are not literally true about me are metaphorically true about me, and that’s an important point,” my mother has bracketed it and written in the margins, “Prove it!”

Because my father cannot prove sanity or truth, my mother searches for it in Slater’s pages. Because Slater denies the need for common or obvious truth, my mother feels insecure, unprotected. I felt this way once, too, when my father was suicidal. But not anymore, because I

have chosen to live in my own memories. I have faced pain in my psyche, and then I have released it. I am not perfect at dealing with pain, nor is anyone I know, yet my mother is still peeking around the corner at the painful memories, and beckoning them to explain themselves in ways that neither they, nor my father, who is their own private God, can.

Near the end of her book, Slater laments what she has lost from illness or from trauma in her family, “I had lost the cherry tree, the toads in the woods, my house, the ants that crawled in a line in front of my house, the grainy golden sandbox of my childhood, the honesty of my childhood [...]” My mother and I both felt we had lost all this, too. We hang onto my mother’s flowers, the above-ground pool, the deck, as good memories, and we try not to lose them. My mother has written the losses in the margins, “Never had this!” The note reads like a small burial for what my mother feels like she has lost. Her ferocity is palpable, mournful.

Only recently did I discover the end-note my mother left in Slater’s book. I am unsure if it was meant for me or for Slater. Either way, it reads: “Her illnesses / depressions made this an unbelievable / difficult non-maternal book to read. I never believed / connected to the truth (even distorted by each person’s memories), which always makes a better story.” Her initials end the passage.

My mother could not shield herself from my father’s disorders, nor could she always shield me from my father. Her nostalgia and her obsessive need for the truth, whatever that is in our family, is murky and confusing. When my father confesses something to her, like not paying back taxes, she deals with it for weeks, going into old files, trying to prove his confessions. I have stopped investigating, and my head is much clearer, less painful.

In the beginning of the text, I see once more my mother’s elegant cursive questioning of Slater, which is really watching her deal with her anger toward my father. Slater has clearly

overwritten a passage where she is in a grocery store, “On that particular day, there were policemen in the supermarket. Now, I have no idea why they were there. They were just hanging around, with guns on their hips.” My mother has written, “Happens in all grocery stores, right?” I have to laugh. It’s my mother, purely. She sees my father lying to her, and she rages against it. She sees the men in guns, and yet again she sees my father there, oiled and ready, fully loaded. Yet she stays. She reads him all the way through. She waits until the final page to write what she thinks, but she does it. She trusts her instincts among the plethora of lies in the writing. Still, she searches for the clear truth, a moment of redemption, a way back out of the deep hole that she is slowly, surely climbing back out of toward her own true light of day.

Circles II

Life is a series of surprises – Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Circles,” 1841

All time is unredeemable – T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” from *Four Quartets*, 1943

Part One: From Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Circles”

The eye is the first circle [...]

I see my father: lean and tall, wide glasses, large nose, broad forehead, laughing with his head back. I see in his eyes mine; I see brown and green specks, I see a golden circle in our right eyes, together, locked in genetics. I see: me.

*Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; around me is the line of my father. Around my father, the line of my mother. Around my mother, the line of her mother. Around my father, nothing but air, no family he speaks to, no living father. When his father dies of an aneurism, my father’s circle sinks into itself, no radius to report. My father crashes his motorcycle, and almost dies himself. Emerson keeps moving, *that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens.* My father was witness to his father’s death as a floating hair in wind; he missed it, and his father missed him. The death was the opening of a mental disease. The death began his mental instability. In mental disability, the beginning was red, painful, real.*

In my childhood, my father was a riot. He was loving, soft. He was gentle, kind. He was raging, scary. He was a permanent mess and good at tennis. He loved to lob the ball too high for my mother when they played on the high school courts at night. He loved his high-paying position at

work in the city. He loved his new shoes, his new suits, his new cufflinks. Everything was silk and silver. He took me to Burger King and let me play with my new Alf puppets. He bought me dresses and sandals. He was patient with me when I tried to make paper stars to hang from the ceiling in my room, but he yelled at me when I could not remember the multiplication tables.

Emerson sees between the threads, knows the labor of the silver-maker: *Everything looks permanent until its secret is known*. Yes, my father fell apart, his shirts tore. He hulked and bumbled and shrank again, into an old, scared man. But he kept his secrets welled so deep, all my time committed to him was static, stuck, wasted.

Every man supposes himself not to be fully understood; [...] The last chamber, the last closet, he must feel was never opened; there is always a residuum known, unanalyzable. That is, every man believes that he has a greater possibility. – from “Circles”

My father developed a system of confessions. He was afraid of church, so confessing was terrifying to him, and he did not believe in secrets. I had to tell him everything about my weekends when I was a teen: where I was, who was there, what we did. When I could not bear to tell him the truth, I lied. I lied openly about playing board games and watching the sunset with friends’ parents. I was with my boyfriend and I was drunk. I was lying on the lawn of a house party. I was having sex. My father began to confess things to me when I went off to college. He hated his mother. He loved his father. He hated his brother. He was depressed. He quit his job. He found a new job. He worked too hard. He was overqualified. He quit drinking.

In a psychiatric hospital, my father gained the understanding of true friendship. His roommate was a clergyman, divorced, addicted to alcohol. They shared disease. He called to tell me all

about his friend for the year he sat in the hospital. He said he got my letters when I asked. He said he tacked them to the walls, along with the phrase *Valor consists in the power of self-recovery*. Thanks to Emerson, I could offer solace in writing. But we turned and turned over and Emerson knew what I could not.

Conversation is a game of circles. So my father called, and I listened. Group therapy, pills, dosages, remedies for rerouting addicted behavior, ways to avoid drinking. On a day pass, he says he went to a bar, just to sit and drink a soda. How risky, I say. How careless.

He said it wasn't hard to do, to just sit there and watch everyone else drinking, paying too much to ruin their lives. He said the bar itself was very beautiful, fully oak, red booths, nice clientele. Businessmen, he said, like me. All drinking their lives away alone, like I was doing. He says this with conviction, nostalgia. I ask him to avoid bars. He says he doesn't have to, but that he will, for my sake.

[...] we now and then detect in nature slight dislocations which apprise us that this sliding surface on which we now stand it not fixed, but sliding. – from "Circles"

My father suffers a heart attack in the hospital. It was mild, don't call, he says. I am fine.

I call. The nurses ask: who? Again, who are you trying to reach?

My father does not have a friend in the hospital. My father is not in the hospital for alcoholism.

My father is a narcissist, suffering a severe psychological break from a severe personality

disorder. My father insists that he is fine, that he just has to remedy the dosage for his mania. I

say, good luck. Now, we slide past each other in the dark, shifting into new lies, scarred and scared and untrustworthy. *Cause and effect are two sides of one fact.* Cause: a lie. Effect: a lie.

My father gives me a sobriety chip for my wedding present. It's earned, something with experience, he says. Make wise choices. In this moment in the backyard, before the guests can see me in my pure, white dress, I see only the moment when my father threw his back out in the front lawn when I was ten. He was alone, bending to pick at a dandelion in the grass, and he set down his gin and tonic, and he swore softly to himself, "Shit," when it happened. The tendons slid out of place and he just could not move. At ten, and afraid of him, I watched him hobble alone to the porch, where he sat and drank in pain.

People say sometimes, 'See what I have overcome; see how cheerful I am; see how completely I have triumphed over these black events.' Not if they still remind me of the black event. – from "Circles"

In the present day, my father's voice is the black event, and I am dragged back to my tiny bedroom that shares a wall with my parents' bedroom in our old, scary house in suburban New York. I am sitting on my canopy bed, with a pink taffeta slip cover, wallowing in my father's screaming.

Now, when he calls, it is always to report news: progress over instability, a recession with mental clarity. But I am presently pulled into the past; in waves and bubbles, I search for breath. In his persistent disease, I witness my past in bursts of his absence and his narcissism, his violence and his manipulations to keep me close. When he asks me if I need any money, I realize that we are both a decade behind this moment; he's pulling a twenty dollar bill out of his thick wallet, and I

am reaching for it, at age fifteen once again. I thank him. When I come home, he will be sleeping as soundly as any tortured man can sleep.

Part Two: From T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*

*But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
Be remembered; involved with past and future.*

– from “Burnt Norton”

Past.

My mother thumbs the thorns of the roses in the side yard, They are a silky yellow, her favorite. They exist for her now as a deep root, a sense of care and belonging, a sense of their need for her hands. Behind her, my father rakes the cut grass into piles and piles, piles of bright green. When this is done, he throws the rake to the ground and screams, *Patty! No! You're trimming them wrong!* He rips the shears from her shaking hands, he prevents her from trimming her favorite roses back. She wants them to grow, she needs them to grow. Their pale yellow faces fade and wilt. He throws the shears to the ground, walking away from the roses.

Future.

My father's hands will tremble. He will call my mother at dusk, when he remembers her best, in her flowers. He will call to say he's sorry, so sorry. He will send flowers, roses, lilacs, tulips, lilies, all to sit for long afternoons on her small concrete walk while she is at work. She will receive the calls and the flowers heavily, like deep pockets of a sorrow that grows and grows. The dark nights will trouble them both, but she will sit toward the mountains and hum. He will turn to the lake and weep.

In my beginning is my end. [...]

There is, it seems to

us,

At best, only a limited value

In the knowledge derived from experience.

The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,

For the pattern is new in every moment.

– from “East Coker”

I do not suffer from a mental illness. Sometimes, I like to go out into a fine rain and listen to the leaves take the drops, the water bouncing in unpredictable directions. The sun in the morning flames through my bedroom window, and there is an owl in the pearly dawn that croaks for its lover. I wait for him to speak, and then I get up. I face the morning straight, stare into the cold clouds or the dense air. I listen for sounds in the trees. My flesh tugs and pulls: a new bump, a flat patch of stomach, a burn on the heel from walking too far. In my sleep, I pop a toe’s tendon, and today it might heal.

You are not the same people who left that station

Or who will arrive at any terminus,

– from “The Dry Salvages”

The family unit orbits. One child, one mother, one father. We orbit and drown in one another. We pull and tug and cut one another loose. I pull hardest away from them, I orbit the moon and the night’s heat. I cross dry paths in the fiery afternoons, sweat and mosquitoes on my brow, and I brave them anyway. I avoid conversations and I watch the distance grow. Too many years, we spent in orbit like this. Too many faces in the pool’s reflection. When I reach the lake, I dive right in, no matter how cold or how hot. I look for eels or snakes but find none. Each day, a new one. Each orbit, a new one. Each distance, greater. Each day: different. We circle and circle; the water recedes to make room for our buoyant weight. Alone, the water rushes, and I swim and paddle for the farthest shore.

This is the use of memory;

*For liberation – not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past.*

– from “Little Gidding”

My mother is a lilac that blooms in the dark. Her cone points northward, a promise. My father is a charcoal-based fire in the bed of a grill, with people gathered around him to eat. They wait, unsure of the time-line for flames. He simmers and bites, simmers and bites. My mother blooms and stays open for hours, her cones building and building on the side yard, close to the chimney with all the bees inside. I surface and float as fine as oxygen, as useless as air, as necessary as carbon, igniting the father and sustaining the mother.

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

– from “Little Gidding”

Finally, no calls from my father. A release and an absence. A night away. I search inward to the night of myself, the recess of fear and the absolutions of childhood. I worry away my twenties exploring the depths of my father, and I come up empty, sobriety chips stuffed into an old bag. When I see my mother, she is new, steel. She gleams in a hardened cast, a new flesh, rosy pink. New place, new state, new day. Now, when I remember them, I see crisp visions. My mother grills and mows her own lawn. My father loves the opera. They are an aria today, a garden tomorrow. They shed skin and I watch it go, never needing to pick any of it up.

Part Three: From Robert Sharvy’s Logic: An Outline

A sorites is a chain of categorical syllogisms with only the premises and the final conclusion stated.

A chain could be made in various ways, one method would be:

*All blondes are beautiful women.
Some teachers are blondes.
All teachers are educated persons.
Therefore, some educated persons are beautiful women.*

My mother's hair has gone white, but she was a blonde, beautiful woman. Her senior-year high school photo sat on her mother's mantle, and I stared and stared at it for hours, willing myself to be half as beautiful as she was.

My mother volunteered at my elementary school as a reading teacher. She taught all the trouble-makers, who would become my close friends, and they all reminisced that my mother was instrumental in their young, literate lives.

My mother dropped out of college in New Hampshire to marry my father. She was at Keene State College, intent on becoming a teacher. She wanted to educate and help. Instead, she moved to North Carolina, where she grew tan and blonder, more beautiful than ever. She learned how to ignore my father's drinking, and how to resist the urge to fight. She took up tennis. She won matches. My mother regrets one of these facts of her life.

1. All mothers love their children.
2. Some children are rebellious.
3. All rebels are confident persons.
4. Therefore, some rebels love their mothers.

Part Four: From Judith Kitchen's *Distance & Direction*

One of my mentors in graduate school was a woman named Judith Kitchen, a poet and essayist. In an effort to engage with my parents at that juncture in my life, I invited them to a book signing and reading she was giving at a local bookstore in downtown Brockport, New York. After the

reading, I brought my parents up to the front to meet her. She was gracious, engaging in conversation with them, though only my mother spoke.

On the way outside, my father led us across the street, where I realized a bar stood, open and inviting. We went in for a drink. That's all I can remember about that afternoon.

[...] our lives are a spiral and, though we circle and circle, we never quite come back to where we began. – from "Distance"

My father stopped and started drinking for years. When I was eighteen, my mother began to express depression over his behavior, and only then did I even acknowledge his alcoholism. It was so obvious, it had been hidden from me. And it was so insidious and destructive to my emotional state, I had chosen to erase it from memory.

During dinner out with my high school boyfriend, I started to receive migraine signals: a massive headache behind my left eye, my vision splitting down the middle, and tingling fingers. As I went ash-pale, my boyfriend noticed and drove me home. Once there, my father, drunk, took me upstairs and screamed at me that I was ungrateful, irresponsible, a horrible child. I sat on my bed, moaning in pain, asking for a washcloth.

"Poor Samantha, does your head hurt? Are you such a baby? Are you in so much pain?" he mocked me.

I started to cry, in pain and fear. My mother came up from behind him with a wet cloth and some water. By this point, I could not see anything; his voice was a vacuum of hate. Finally, I passed out. The mocking was new in the pattern of my father's rages, and it never happened again.

The pattern of cruelty had somehow been broken. As he kept drinking, I kept suffering terrible migraines. When I went off to college, the migraines stopped.

We cannot know more than what we've done together – from "Distance."

If Kitchen is right, my father and I are on separate seas, floundering miserably. We probably are. I remember eating ice cream with my father but not what his favorite flavor was. I can remember my father teaching me math, yelling at my brain to work, but I cannot see the problems scrambled in my head. I could be any age when I am on the softball field and he's the coach, asking me to stop being afraid of the ball. I cannot rely on my own series of memories of my father; they are terribly unreliable, halves of the man that exists.

My father kept and keeps secrets. My mother did, too, to protect me, she says now. My father's life spun down a massive drain, and on the upswing, he inherited mental disease and depression. "Severe," he says to me on the phone, "and pathological." He insists that he never killed anyone. I nod and sip some wine. I try to invent a history of answers, an encyclopedia of Dad that follows a linear path, but it is invisible, a lie.

Yet we still talk. When my father's dog swallowed a walnut and nearly choked to death, he called me. His circle led to me. When I passed an exam in school, I called him to boast as an adult. This circle can swallow me if I am not careful – boasting and talking are two separate things. But I boast, a pattern, and I talk, something new, and we circle and return to one another.

My family unit is a triangle, with edges and spikes, corners built in at every angle. I can see our soft curves, the approach of an oval, meek and wavering around us. We feel the lines curve and soften, and we quake. As Emerson, Eliot, and Kitchen remind me, a circle is not an end but a beginning. Like a circle that works well, the marrow accounts for its shape. I must move forward with my life. I can see the fury of my father and the sorrow of my mother and I lift off the edge of our circle, pulling it back to reveal the rest.

We lived at One Knapps Circle, Fairport, New York, 14450.

Different Ways Out of Town

The years teach much which the days never know – Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience”

During a recent visit to New Hampshire, I see that my grandmother is losing her memory. At her kitchen table, she takes out a black-and-white photograph of herself as a young girl, with her sister, her brother, and her parents gazing over the three of them. In it, she is radiant, a girl of eleven, a girl with the world before her. She names the people from left to right, then stares blankly. “I have no idea where we are in this,” she murmurs. A half-hour later, she picks up the same photograph in her shaky hands, and names everyone in the same order; she is still hung up on the place.

My grandmother has lived in Lyme, New Hampshire, for nearly her entire life; now, my mother lives down the road from her. When my husband and I, on our latest visit, attend the annual Christmas party in my grandmother and step-grandfather’s log cabin, they make a reticent announcement amid turkey legs; they are moving into a retirement community. I drop the roll I am holding. We are all either stunned or relieved, depending on the level of dependence my grandparents have had on each of us lately. To cope, we drink. Uncle Donald, the youngest, snaps icicles from the roof to stir his rum-and-diet coke. Aunt Barb tells the story of my father falling into the front well of the cabin in his attempt to fix a leak. Everyone laughs awkwardly; suddenly, this is the last holiday gathering. The air has changed. It is starting to ice and snow, one final glaze. My mother stands at the deck door, sipping her vodka slowly. My grandmother sits in the corner with her poinsettias and thumbs through her calendar. When I go to the deck to retrieve a beer, the wood is slippery and the sky is full. The stars are shrouded, but I can still see my mother and father out here in summertime heat, cooking on the grill for everyone inside. I

see my grandmother swimming small circles in the above-ground pool. Now, a circular spot of snow sits there, cobalt.

When I come back in, Aunt Barb is telling the one where she was challenged to a midnight foot race in the steep front-yard dense with forest. “I ran smack into that goddamned tree!” she says, pointing out the dark window. My grandmother barely looks up; she’s counting the days in her black-and-white calendar.

When it’s time to leave, I look around. My step-grandfather is stuffing homemade peanut butter balls into his gaping mouth. My grandmother places a hand on my shoulder, “I’ll see you tomorrow,” she says, though I know she will not. I will be on a plane for Kansas; I will be leaving this place. I nod, “Yes, you will,” I say, and head for the last time down the rickety stairs, away from the warm kitchen with vanilla ice cream in the freezer and chicken on the stove. This is the last residence of my childhood, the last place where I can remember seeing my parents happy. From the window, my grandmother waves, all her silver bracelets swaying.

When my father first lowered me onto the lush grass of a green field, he may not have expected that I would scream. I did. I lunged away from the specs of dirt and seed, the strands of watery tube and root. I was terrified of the grass. My mother panicked, my father laughed. I screeched. I tried to stand, but my legs betrayed me. The wind blew; a spider crawled over the stalks of grass and toward my fleshy calf. Before I could scream again, my father lifted me over his bony shoulder and took me to the relieving green concrete turtle near the tennis court, a flat reptilian statue that was as close to pavement as he could find.

I crawled and crawled over that turtle; I tried to fit into his slightly open mouth. Soon, moved by my intense fear of the outdoors, my parents shuttled me home, where my father,

growing increasingly paranoid of the outside world, drew all the blinds before sunset and closed us in. That summer would be the first of many when it grew dark in the house during sunny afternoons; my father was closed off, the shades were drawn tight, and I was afraid to go outside. I learned at an early age to be terrified of exploration; it would take me years to grow accustomed to moving through a new landscape or city grid. When I finally did, I found that I kept moving farther and farther away from my father, who was the one who had tried to hardest to keep me close.

In my mid-twenties, I moved from upstate New York all the way to Kansas for graduate school, and it is where I live today. I study the Midwestern landscape day in, day out. I work on accepting fewer snowy days and more oppressively hot ones. There is more vast, open field here. I sometimes think back to me and my grandmother eating dinner in wet bathing suits on her deck at dusk in New Hampshire. I can still feel my old self on her high deck beside the swimming pool in a cool afternoon. I feel a tug now – this is both my and Emerson’s landscape – crisp afternoons, tough pines, dusks that become compasses for us both.

There was a bridge next to the house I grew up in, and it spanned the Erie Canal. It was rusted and it swayed when the wind was fierce. My mother avoided it at all costs, running the car through towns with speed limits of ten miles per hour near the high school. She was afraid that the bridge would collapse, as the newspaper projected each year and yet, each year, my school bus coursed right over it on bright mornings, carrying all our tiny faces.

At that point in our lives, my mother and father had regular jobs and came home after work to a drink, a smoke, and dinner. I did my homework and played with the dog. Railroad tracks ran alongside the bridge, and on hot summer days before my dad installed an air

conditioner, I would crane my head out my bedroom window to see trains rush past. At night, with the window open, I feared that runaways would escape when a train stopped, climb up the steep hill from the canal path, come upon our small cul-de-sac, and choose our house with my open window to break into with a knife. In this way, I begged for life to be transitory. *Don't let the train stop*, I would silently plead, shivering and huddled under the covers. I could just barely breathe, waiting for a scary man to come from the shadows of my small window. As I grew older, friends would come to that same window, and throw stones at it so I knew to come out. Usually, my mother heard me and let me go anyway, and my father was downstairs, passed out with his hands in a potato chip bag, and he didn't hear me at all.

My grandmother's life is ending, though I cannot see this yet and I am not ready or willing to accept it. Instead, I hold her laugh in my hands, and the way she holds a glass, as if it will fall from her palm, and the short swipes of blush she puts on her cheeks, especially if she is going into Lyme, or misremembers plans and dolls herself up with rouge, eye shadow, and curlers. I still see moss on stone in the side yard of my grandmother's log cabin, and inside, all the bedroom furniture is polished. Now, she says things like "I have nothing of value" and means them.

She finds her first engagement ring in the back of an old jewelry drawer, from her first husband, my grandfather, who died at the age of twenty-six. She asks my mother to appraise it. My mother takes it, watches the jeweler handle it in the light of the afternoon. The jeweler shakes his head. To me, on the phone, my mother recounts, "It was worth nothing, but we aren't going to tell her that." Instead, she tells my grandmother that it's something worth keeping, and everyone seems happy with this.

My grandmother was the one I saw every summer when my parents were trying to keep their marriage together. Once, in sixth grade, I stayed for a longer time than normal. It was full of vanilla bean ice cream cones, nighttime river swims, candy dinners, and coarse, blackened chicken and rice. But this time, in the middle of my stay, I became wildly homesick. I was convinced I would have to hitch a ride home. My cousin, four years younger than me, saw me go into my bedroom and shut the door. “What’s wrong with her?” he asked my grandmother. I heard her say, “Oh, honey, she’s just homesick. It happens to everyone.”

That night, we ate corn on the cob and watched *On Golden Pond* again. My step-grandfather fell asleep before the boat hit the rock, but my grandmother and I were glued there, hands in salty white popcorn. That night, I watched the ceiling for spiders through the cracks of the logs, but found none, so instead I listened to the pines rustle on the steep hill outside and decided to settle in New Hampshire when I grew up.

On a cold January day, I come across Robert Creeley’s poem “Memory.” I have to read it many times. Each time I have to push back the immediate sweeping rush of my parents’ small house, my grandmother’s log cabin and our chicken dinners, my father when he wasn’t so sick. I read the end again and again:

I cannot
believe age can be easy for anyone. *On
Golden Pond* may be a pleasant picture
of a lake and that general area of
New Hampshire, but it’s not true,
any of it. Please, don’t put, if

you can help it, your loved ones in
a care facility, they will only die there.

It is two weeks before my grandparents will move from their log cabin into a retirement community. It has been five weeks since my father threw all his medication away. I sit, staring at the blue-grey sky. Unable to wrangle my father into therapy, and unwilling to offer him a room in my apartment, I pretend he's the same man who sat with me on the turtle. I erase memories of him throwing meatloaf against the dining room wall, or demanding to know where my mother had been after a late day at work. All I want is for someone to care for my father to afford me some breathing space. I want him to be well; I just don't want the caretaker to be me.

When I call my mother, she tells me that my father won't sign the divorce papers, and that my grandmother is resistant to packing. While my mother spends the afternoon packing my grandmother's clothes, my grandmother spends the night putting them back on their wire hangers.

My mother is the oldest of seven siblings and replete with what I think are symptoms of memory loss, too. She has recently begun to take fish oil in the morning to avoid forgetting; as Emerson was, she is terrified to lose more memories. Last week, she forgot altogether that I had spoken to her the night before, which was her birthday. I worry for her; she lives alone. I worry that with my grandmother in her new apartment, we will completely lose her, that all her tales, half-told, will sink into mossy ground. I already see memory loss with my manic father; his stories are half-imagined, sometimes hallucinatory, sometimes pieced together from a blackout. I used to think he was lying by omission; now, I witness a loss so profound that sometimes it

renders him speechless over the phone. Like my grandmother, he's working on keeping everything steady in his own dark closet.

My father writes me about some memories he's having and he asks if I remember the birthday where I ate black olives. *So unusual*, he writes, *for you to like olives*. I do remember, though I do not disclose this to him. I remember staring at the holes inside all those olives.

After he signs the divorce papers, my mother calls to tell me. She is celebrating with wine, but she also has news. Last week, my grandmother's close friend went out at night into the freezing New England winter. She discovered slowly that she could not find her way home. She stopped at a gas station for directions back to Lyme, with its giant holiday pine lit up in Lyme Square; it has looked the same for decades. Unfazed by her shoddy, disoriented appearance, two police officers both gave her directions: one road, nine miles. It was nearly ten at night. She went another way. In an effort to save herself more confusion, she pulled over onto the side of a road. It was snowing. She got out of her car to plod roughly in the darkness. I imagine the snow was fierce at her back. It was a new storm, one with snow covering her sides and her long, shadowed face, constantly masking her tracks.

In the morning, her son went looking for her. He was frantic. He found her, frozen solid, in the lawn of an elderly couple's home. With all the wind, the couple said they didn't hear her; they could not recall if they had heard anyone yell for help. All three stood helpless, staring at a trace of the path that the woman made in the snow.

Halves

He has seen but half the universe who never has been shown the House of Pain – Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Tragic”

Ralph Waldo Emerson saw tragedy even on the sandy banks of the Nile as the sun ran down the Egyptian hills and slanted his lovely daughter’s face. Half the universe is a shallow, cold place; sorrow becomes a consoler of absences, a place to rest, a unified vision of darkness. The House of Pain, the lurid building made stable by human emotion, was not something Emerson liked, but it lit his house on fire.

When my father had a mental breakdown, he lived in a house without electricity and lined up lottery cards on both countertops in the small kitchen. The refrigerator had been ripped from the wall; where Emerson’s house had no running water, that was all that my father had, and he wept on its banks. His House of Pain was immeasurable; Emerson’s was merely acute.

To Emerson, the universe was wide, a thing undone by machinery, technological replacements for human parts, and disease that riddled human flesh and took Ellen from him, and Waldo. To my father, the universe was a house untold, a furious tornado without storm doors. To me, the universe is a gleaming, ruby world marred by my father’s demons; they arrived in the dark quietude of long nights and overran the fires in the fireplace.

Half the universe is a big place. Sorrow and pain comprise part of it; people die, family members are hit head-on in unexpected collisions, and we rush to wonder if fate pursued us, or them. We are relieved when the car cruises by, hitting someone else. It is by no coincidence that the human brain registers relief even when waking from a dream. But if fate, as Emerson suggests, is not to be trusted, we must account for our emotions elsewhere. Someone must be accountable. My father blamed the universe for his helplessness and he drove across the country to escape it; Emerson sailed across oceans and rivers in search of that perfect circle. What he

found instead were half-moons cresting in silence, or snowflakes that comprised a drop of the changing world. His heart swelled to discomfort. He pined for the day that his son's death would no longer cloud his memory. Giving himself only two weeks to grieve the loss, he pulled himself outside, watched a sunrise, devoting himself to a diurnal cycle of the universe that was, if not whole any longer, a sort of triangle of splintered but real possibility.

My father traveled alone, and visited no one, on his journey through the Midwest to get to rehabilitation. He spoke to no one except me on the motel phones, rasping that he was still alive after drinking a gallon of Scotch. He trembled with a loss so profound that the energy of a snowfall on a rural road was but a pinprick full of blood and metal. I mapped my father's progress nightly; when he arrived in Minnesota, I took a gulp of fresh air in an alley between two houses in the city where I lived. Nothing, not even love, tasted like this.

Pain is the antidote to happiness the way that hail is a careful reminder of the beauty of a rainstorm. Balls of ice fall from the sky, and we watch and cover our heads. It seems we cannot do a thing about it except predict the direction of the tornado. I have watched hail sweep the plains in hazy backyards. I have listened to hail on the roof with wonder and glee, so happy to be inside. Emerson stuffed grey days deep into his pockets and gouged them when in need. My father, likewise, keeps sobriety chips in his pants pockets; we all have reminders of our sorrows.

Emerson liked to take walks. He noted in his journal the occasions of wonder, the berries too bright on a faded bush, the slight shade of afternoon light amid the shaky autumn leaves. He did not see only half the universe; it's simply not possible. He saw its amplification, the curved potential of the New England horizon on a January day, when the darkness creeps into an afternoon. Like my father, he felt too much, until he did not want to feel at all. Like me, Emerson saw the inevitability of human feeling, and felt anyway.

Emerson is not remembered for his sense of the tragic; he himself offers us a sense of solace in nature that is not bound to corporeal reality. He was, and is, Thoreau's morning star. My father is an orbiting halfway house, stocked with energetic sadness. I have been shown a literal House of Pain; I have turned on my heel and left, having felt its heavy door.

Section Four
The Map of Me.

Behind Us, the Full Neighborhood

The moon shines emergent, lighting our slow climb up the hill, across the little dry creek with crushed beer cans scattered, embedded in the banks, some with my fingerprints all over them. The wide soccer field behind the high school gleams as dusk shapes and covers it, and a deer in front of us, unafraid – living so close to people. These days don't wash like they used to: they hang on the line just down from your father leaving, the basement cleared, my father's drinking. Back then, our feet left deep imprints in this mud, and our hands touched.

But now, that light: its yellow hands paint everything. Here, you and I, and nothing comes after.

On Forgiving

Before I am born, my father is asked to speak at Syracuse University, his alma mater, about his quick success in the business world. He stands nervously backstage, dressed in a suit. He pulls at the tie my mother picked out for him and takes a deep breath. On stage, one of his past business professors works through my father's introduction addressed to the graduating seniors and MBA students seated in the hot auditorium. My father hears his name, "Craig," as it carries softly to the rafters above him. He also hears "Vice-President" and "graduated only last May," and "one of the top employees at Sibron," and he begins to get nervous. He starts shaking. His cue is coming, and he stands close to the edge of the wings. Finally, he takes a breath and walks out slowly. He walks to the large oak podium and clears his throat. Silence. He starts to talk, then stops. He coughs and steps away from the podium, courses slowly down the stairs. He does not look at a single fresh face. He simply strides out the thick double doors, down the sloped sidewalk, and steps into his car. He drives away, the building a brick hole in his rearview. His breath is a thick stench of failure, nerves, and beer. His blood-alcohol level, he will tell me years later, must have been high from the night before. He goes quiet each time he tells me this, as if surprised that this is how the story ends; as if he is just learning, each time, that this moment happened.

The moment a child realizes her father is an alcoholic shifts the tectonic plates of the universe, and atoms collide to demonstrate gravity's useless purpose. The child often blames herself, in a moment of natural self-reflection. I could have been better, more perfect. I tried to be perfect for years, I tried to stay far away from my father's rages, his torrents of grief and internal disregard for the human race moving through the rooms of his house. What most people

forget, however, is the element of forgiveness. What is forgiveness but acceptance of one's ultimate failures of character, a severance of a value system and its admission of guilt about that chasm that cannot, will not, be mended? The moment of realization calls for a choice within the child: should I forgive immediately and accept, or should I be defiantly angry, this world suddenly and without warning turned unfairly against me? Forgiveness is often thought to be an act of virtue: I forgive you for eating my last cookie. I forgive you for cheating on that test. I forgive you for yelling at me. But what if my forgiving has less to do with the act than the person behind the act, me? What if forgiveness is selfish, and personal? What if forgiveness misses the mark altogether, and has nothing to do with the alcoholic and his child's bleeding, forgiving heart?

Outside, on our plush green lawn with lawn-mower marks etched in straight, long lines to the road, my father's voice carries and is sharp. His vowels bite the air. My name, "Samantha," becomes a curse, and slopes over my head and plummets straight into my pulsing nerves. He endlessly tosses the softball to me, and each time, I either swing and miss, or duck. As it gets darker, his yelling grows louder, and he shouts "Aim!" repeatedly at me. I stand on the lawn, desperate, only a child. I am also, of course, an *only child*. This is a gaping hole; I stare at a big black vortex of space. I have my mother, who stands in the window, clutching a dishrag nervously in her hands, but I am in the yard alone, with my father. As an only child, I am not only alone but must also face forgiveness head on for social survival. If I do not forgive my father for yelling at me, drunk and pushing my elbows into bat-holding position, then my family unit pares to one – my mother. And while I love her, this does not stop me from wishing, alone on the grass on a late summer evening, that he didn't exist. When my father gives up on me and

goes inside, I wish on a silver, stationary star in the sky: *make my father like me. Make me more athletic.* I learn forgiveness on the lawn, alone; I learn by forgiving myself for the things I cannot do. I wish on this one, hollow star.

It has taken me decades to reduce these feelings into a contained space that I can palm and stare at; today, the knowledge that I did not cause my father's inevitable alcoholic downfall is a tiny kernel of shiny light. I knew this was not my fault. I paid my bills, I finished school, and I didn't ask him for much. Occasionally, I would have Sunday dinner with him, and that was all. The crucial element of forgiveness as an act is this: I did not cause this. That's the beginning. Knowing that my hands were clean meant I could start to look at things differently. I could pull them apart; I was not within the in-seams of these moments. I was the witness. From here, pity washes over me. To forgive is to empathize, and resort to that bulky tangle of pitying someone, namely my father, for the things he cannot change.

I can hardly think of one true thing my father told me. In kindergarten, he told me that Michael Jackson's glove covered a fake hand. As I got older, and his drinking grew more serious, he lied about paying my college tuition. He held credit cards in different names, in my name, and my mother disclosed to me once that she cannot be sure he did not have an affair with a secretary named Ginny. This is what forgiveness cannot harness; that deep, immeasurable distrust of someone I love. Forgiveness asks us occasionally, with empathy, to understand. How can I understand that my father just wasn't paying federal income taxes? Furthermore, can forgiveness gauge what is important and what is not? And if so, is it important to forgive lying to one's wife, and daughter, to forgive looking into our big green eyes and asking us to believe?

My father stopped drinking when he moved into his mother's house in Minnesota. On his first day of in-patient rehabilitation, at a psychiatric clinic in St. Cloud, I went to my first Al-

Anon meeting in Rochester, New York. I hated it. They ask of us, family members of alcoholics, to say this recitation with them: *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* I was terrified. What if my father decided he couldn't change his drinking? Then what? It did bring me solace to know that there were rooms full of people, chock full, who were working on forgiving those they loved.

Before my father could leave rehab, I was contacted by his psychiatrist. Would I, he asked, be willing to write a letter to my father, to be read out loud on the last day of his group meeting, addressing the major issues and problems he has caused me over the years of his acute alcoholism? I panicked. Criticizing an alcoholic is like running the bulls in Barcelona; you don't have a chance, and invariably, at some point, you will be run over and hurt. But wasn't this it, that fine moment of fruitful forgiveness? I agreed to do it.

I waited for weeks. Finally, on a day full of bleak weather, cars stuck in piles of snow coating the narrow city streets, I sat down with a glass of red wine and wrote the letter. In it, I chronicled his abhorrent actions, the bills I was paying slowly, the heartaches. The wine sat idle, its level unchanged in the glass. At the close, I paused. Did I forgive my father? I wanted the worst to be over, and forgotten. Yet forgetting is not the same thing. Often, as fighting children, we are taught to forgive and forget, a popular cliché. Forgetting, however, is a sort of omission. Forgiving is looking at something head on, addressing the instance with full, conscious awareness. Forgetting is letting the fish off the hook; forgiving is placing that fish in the hull of the boat, and watching him suck air very briefly before throwing him back in again.

I wrote the last paragraph of the letter professing forgiveness, writing that if he took one thing from me, it was that I forgave him. Afterward, I walked in a blizzard with the completed

letter in my right gloved hand, and watched it slide gracefully down the bright blue chute.

Almost immediately, I wanted it back.

On his last day of rehab, my father cleared his voice and read my letter. At the end, I am told, his voice cracked, and he had to stop three times. The ending, he said, was the best and most loving part. I disagree. The most loving part was the imparting of my honest account, the harsh indulgence that he certainly did hurt me. What sticks, however, is the forgiveness. Do I believe it, myself? Some days. I picture my father's bleak afternoons, taking care of his aging mother, and walking places because his car was taken by its loan-holders. In my jewelry box sit two sobriety medallions that he sent me. I see them each morning when I put my wedding band on. Some days, they gleam, but others, I want to throw them away. Forgiveness is slippery and incessant. Forgiving my father ties him to me inextricably, in that I have said: *I love you anyway*. I have made him a part of my new life, and he has made me a part of his.

At the end of his letter-reading oratory, I like to picture my father in his pajamas that he mailed to me when he was released. They were white and soft. I like to picture him in a cheap plastic chair, a styrofoam coffee cup sitting at his left foot. I like to picture him looking into the other patients' faces. I like to think the audience is captured. I like to think he found, at last, an audience, and I like to think he spoke loudly, and with the god-awful truth. For this, I can forgive.

Unforgiving

That is the substance of remembering – sense, sight, smell: the muscles with which we see and hear and feel – not mind, not thought: there is no such thing as memory: the brain recalls just what the muscles grope for: no more, no less: and its resultant sum is usually incorrect and false and worthy only of the name of dream – Rosa, from William Faulkner’s Absalom! Absalom!

My father’s real alma mater is unknown and unknowable. My mother insists that he did not, in fact, get his MBA from Syracuse, although she can substantiate that he attended classes and taught a few, too, and that they lived together outside the Lockheed-Martin plant in a suburban apartment complex with a big deck and the *Wall Street Journal* splayed across their kitchen counters. My father touts his MBA in casual conversations now, especially when he talks about running health-care offices, and university health centers in Rochester, where I was born. All of it is a fickle memory of dust to me, even his appearance. I haven’t seen him in years, not since he moved again and took out his entire row of bottom teeth, apparently replaced by dentures that, as he says, make his tongue click funny on the roof of his mouth, and change his overall pattern of speech.

We talk on the phone, but rarely. When my mom divorced him, he went on a rampage of teary messages on my voicemail, asking if I remembered better days when the three of us were a family. He would leave messages asking, “Don’t you remember your childhood? Wasn’t it good?” and I erased the messages with my straight and pink forefinger. *Yep*, I thought. *I do remember, and you can go to hell.*

I always knew my father was an alcoholic, and as a result, I knew chaos early on, in the days in the light-yellow kitchen when he couldn’t hold me because he was so drunk and I ingested his inebriation as somehow my fault, and tried for eighteen years to reduce the chaos by being diligent and perfect. It just so happened that I was good at reading at an early age, lucky that I decided not to be a junky or a drug addict or a floozy.

I remember that my father tried to teach me Spanish as I was learning to read in English. This encouraged me to yell out “cinco” when we got to five in Mr. Clark’s kindergarten class, and everyone stared at me.

I do not remember my paternal grandmother; my father took me to see his mother once, when I was five, and we drove all the way from New York to St. Charles, Minnesota, to a white, dank house, and I played a Baked Beans counting game on the kitchen table while the adults drank in the living room. The cousins I was playing with were his nephews, his older brother’s kids; what I remember is that we were all blonde and I thought they were nice.

I remember a painting of a road as if I were walking on it that my father painted with dark, heavy oil paints when I was a baby. It sat, dumped, in the basement, with all his other grand ideas: an exercise bike next to a Soloflex machine, a rock recreation of Stonehenge, a trampoline, and an entire set of weights that were lifted only when he needed to make room for the orange soda stash and the vodka stash, though sometimes these were the same stash.

When I was ten, my father read every night before he went to sleep; he read from an outdated, worn, yellowed almanac that counted down the days until harvest. We harvested nothing, living in the suburbs, and he grew up in a city, but he said it taught him patience and the earth’s cycles. I paged through the maps when he was away on business or away, later, in bars, during what was supposed to be his work day, skimming my tiny fingertips across the global divisors, the oceanic blues and the volcanic reds that enforced such a serious sense of depth and roughness they caused me to fear traveling for quite some time.

Once, we went on a family vacation. My mom and my dad sat me in the middle seat in the back of the car; we drove all the way to South Carolina, to revisit where my parents met in high school. On our last day, my dad, drunk, dragged an enormous hermit crab shell out of the

ocean with his bare hands. Panting into the sand, he dragged the red and brown shell that stank of wet, mauled dog over the hot, blazing sand. The crab had left long ago, crawled away, and at my tender age of ten, I mourned its loss of a home by searching for the scared crab up and down the beach before the tide came rolling in; all this I did while my parents yelled over taking the shell home with us, on that thirteen-hour car trip back. My father won, stowing the shell on top of our belongings we had packed quickly to allow time for one last stroll on the beach. I never found the crab, but I imagined he found a better home anyway. We pulled over halfway to New York and the shell was tossed by my mother's delicate and furious hand.

My father, I remember painfully, tried to teach me things that I am afraid of doing today, for fear of being an ultimate failure, as if someone might rush from the bushes or the bleachers or the back of the classroom and say, Wrong! He tried to teach me math, which went like this:

"Samantha, what's six times eight?"

"Um, one hundred." I said the scores I got on the top of spelling sheets, numbers I knew I had seen.

"No! Damnit! Try harder."

"Um, thirty-eight." I made up answers, my eyes on our cute dog. Normally, my father would just get up, make a drink, and never come back; I never waited.

Just after my third grade year ended, my father decided to coach my girls' softball team. The afternoons had previously been reserved for me to stand in the outfield, pick flowers, and practice my ballet routines; ballet was something I was, in fact, precise and skilled at. I loved the perfection and the muscle control, the lack of a team effort in lieu of each one of us dancers being singled out for being better. On the softball field, I was scared of chasing the white ball.

My dad, a lunatic, charged the field during practice, throwing the ball to me in the outfield to remind me to “never be at ease,” as if this were the army. We won almost every game.

At the end of the season, I was the only player who was not awarded a game ball after a game. I sulked at home, trying not to cry. My father told me that we all couldn't win, and, anyway, the assistant coach, Mr. Thomas, was in charge of the ball-giving ceremonies. “But even his daughter got one,” I wailed. In my bedroom, my father handed me a used ball from the spare bedroom closet. I said thanks. It wasn't the one I wanted. Seeing this, my father dragged me into the car, drove to Mr. Thomas's residence in an upscale suburban neighborhood not far from us, and banged on the door. Brittany came to the door, still in uniform. “Stay here,” my dad said. I went and sat in the car. Three minutes later, my dad arrived with a ball, autographed by Mr. Thomas himself, in black ink against the red seam. “Here,” my dad said. We never spoke of it again.

How do I say that I was never good enough, and that I thought if I dated nice men, and weighed ninety-five pounds, and got straight As, and went to a good college, and added a dance minor and a philosophy minor, and got scholarships, and won awards for writing in the college newspapers, and then the local newspapers, and then won national awards, this would make my father actually care about me, and love me? My father did care about me, and did love me, and does. But what is enough? And from whom? And when?

When I was in college, my father tumbled down the basement stairs, the garage stairs, and finally broke a framed picture of the town I grew up in when he got drunk and fell into the wall. He sloped downward to the floor in the shards of glass. The rare drawing, one of two hundred, slipped from the glass in torn sheets of Fairport. The Hesslers' huge colonial mansion ripped in half, my father's blood coated the top of Minerva Brown Middle School, the high

school swam in a sea of gin and tonic and the soccer field was magnified in slivers of broken glass.

My father showed up at my apartment one hot summer afternoon, after my Master's was completed and my husband and I had moved into a new city, an hour from my parents. We were heating up leftovers for lunch. My father did not talk to Dan and he refused to come any further into our apartment. Instead, he took my hand on the street and sat me down on a bench near the ivy growing on a brick building. He said, "Your mom thinks I went to get tools to fix the garage door, but I didn't. I lied. I can't think straight. People are following me, and I can't stop them. I see things in red all the time."

I put him into my car and drove him home, where my mom started to shake, and my father stoically said he was fine. I called a hospital to see if they could take him in; he had to be committed, or I could call the police if he was unwilling. He was unwilling. He said he had been having visions, and that his workplace was hostile, and that he needed to rest. As we stared at him, he grew more in control and told us that this was a lapse in judgment and simple anxiety from stress at work. Finally, due to his resistance to professional help, I left. I thought of Dan, my bed, the black night that was coming because the only coping mechanism my father had was alcohol. The sun was going down when I drove home on the black asphalt highway shaking because what else could I do with sympathetic rage?

The first memory I have of living in my parents' first and only house is having terrible leg cramps in my calves; they were shaking tremendously underneath my pale paper-thin skin, and my mom rose from her bed to wrap hot towels around them. I practiced ballet diligently, even as a six-year-old, and was often dehydrated. My father was in Europe, on business. I do not recall him calling, even once, and all the pictures he brought back were of mummies from one

certain museum. I didn't understand it when he handed me a new Cabbage Patch doll with curly brown hair – wasn't she American? From then on, I decided my father was mysterious, curious, a “world-traveler.” Because of the doll, though, I wondered later if he'd ever left the airport.

I never knew what drove my father to drink; I often wasn't aware that he was drunk. Drunk was always just the way Dad was. Growing up, I never pieced together that the only times we had family dinners out was at the bar down the street, where all the waitresses knew his name. I tried not to see my friends gently clutching his elbows as he slurred into his big leather chair positioned in front of the gigantic television. Often, I asked him to my Honor's Society banquets and awards ceremonies, but he never came, blaming it on always needing to take care of the dog at home; she couldn't be left too long.

The night I graduated from high school, before heading out with friends, my parents drove me home from the ceremony. We pulled into a dark garage, a dark house. In the middle of the living room floor, our chocolate lab had left an enormous, high pile of poop. My father flung down my diploma, nearly into the shit, and said, “Goddamnit, Samantha!” I was stunned. What did I do? My mother shook her head at me. “Go,” she said. “Go out,” she commanded me, opening the front door wide. “Congratulations,” she said, her eyes blue with tears.

When I was young, my father brought gifts home to me before dance recitals, like a stuffed animal I wanted, or flowers. When I danced my last solo on stage, he was not there. When I went to bed, he and my mom had screaming fights. On routine, long-distance phone calls, he would tell me I had a curfew, or couldn't go to a party I told him I was on my way to. Usually, I would just hand the phone to my mom, shrug my shoulders, and walk out the door when the doorbell rang for me. Does all this add up to a life lived with my father? Does all this

end up in a letter, penned by my right hand, the left holding a full glass of wine, wondering what on earth to write to my father when I couldn't recall the sound of his voice, or that, the last time I spoke to him, his teeth were so rotten he could eat only soft foods and that this prohibited clarity of speech?

When I was seven, I had to take tennis lessons, and I hated them. My father also made me attend his and my mom's practice sessions as doubles partners, on the high school court, desolate in the twilight when normal families sat down to dinner. When my father tried to teach me how to drive standard in this same parking lot, I got out of the car after he yelled one last time and told me helplessly to "Try harder, push in the clutch!" I walked in the snow toward home. He pulled up next to me on the road. "Get in the car," he demanded. I shook my head, trembling, afraid to show emotion, afraid not to.

Today, I am glad that I refused to get into his car. I do not know if it was okay. I do not know if we are okay. I do not know if I might suffer from alcoholic genes, drinking as I do every weekend, with all my friends, my husband, and my husband's friends. I do not know what my dad looks like today, though he says he has been sober for two years, and I want to think, good for him. I lied to him, I lied straight through the crossed F in "I forgive you" that I wrote, because I do not know what that means. I do not know if he even forgives himself. I do not know anymore what forgiveness means. I forgive him for hitting the dog when I was twelve and the dog was an eight-month-old puppy, but when I recall that Shetland Sheepdog skidding across the floor again and again in my mind, I know I do not forgive him.

I hold too tightly to the things that I think I know, these vivid color memories that my mother hardly recalls, these snapshots of him dancing, or hitting his head on the chimney. How can I forgive what I cannot rightly remember? When I recall him reading my fallacious letter to

his rehab group on his last day, when I was not there, I do like to think he spoke loudly, and with the God-awful truth. I like to think I know what that is, but likely, whatever it was he said, and to whomever it was he said it, the faces of our shared pasts blurred together. The words I think I hear are all sloppy black lines that bind me to a hazy childhood, a glass with ice in it, a beer in a hand, an unworn suit, a family photo with all of us, three strangers suffering, my eyesight obscured, a ball hurling toward me, a gloved hand, unready. We start in the middle, working painfully, slowly outward, with our oak-tree memories rotting, uprooted, stuck in the cold ground, rooting and unrooting whatever it is we remember, wedging dirt in the small spaces we think we can fill.

The Interview

I was sitting in the large meeting room of the Lawrence Public Library in Kansas, facing two middle-aged women in pastel cotton shirts. The one interviewing me sipped slowly on a Diet Dr. Pepper, something that caused me to think of tin in my mouth. I was brought here to demonstrate my library experience in hopes of getting a part-time reference job, and I wanted it very badly. So far, the interview was going great, and I was feeling confident. The woman asking the questions paused, sipped, and asked, “Can you tell us about a time when you were working in a library and had to call police or thought you would need to? What happened, and how did you deal with it?”

I gulped and sat back.

“Yes,” I said, folding my shaky hands. “I think I can.”¹

The woman and her note-taker both nodded appreciatively.

“Well, as I said, I worked as a Children’s Librarian a few years ago in New York, and the room was in the very back of the building. On a morning when few of the staff were present, I was shelving books in the Non-Fiction section when a rather agitated man arrived, looking for someone.”²

¹ I could. My father’s paranoid face came to view, his sweaty forehead. I could think of no other example except this one, so I thought hard for a minute, stalling.

² The staff was, in fact, present. They were hiding. Earlier that morning, on a premonition that my father would show up at the library, I had wrangled my boss and the staff, taken them to the outside gazebo overlooking the Erie Canal, and disclosed to them that my father was in the middle of a mental breakdown, that my mother recently told him she was leaving him, and that he was certain people were following him. All week, he had been badgering me to borrow my car; I kept saying no. While no one was looking, he had a key made, and started using the car anyhow, putting it back in a different parking spot each time. Aside from notifying the staff that morning that my father had been stealing my car, I told them that he was likely fed up with me and would come here, harassing me as a last resort.

My boss called a crisis hotline for me, and I told a nice man named Jeff what was happening. We were advised to sprinkle ourselves throughout the stacks to avoid me being cornered by my father alone. When he arrived, I was shelving, and women in skirts and tanks listened for any sign of danger, just a few feet away from us.

I took a breath and acted as if this was difficult to recall, as if this memory was hazy. “The man,” I started again, “um, he appeared to be a bit unstable. He was sweating, and he was agitated.”³

The interviewer paused, leaned in. “What do you mean, agitated? How did you know he was agitated?”

I nodded. “Yes, well, he couldn’t make a full sentence, he was talking in gibberish almost, in fragments, and he couldn’t catch his breath.”⁴

I continued on just as the sun was masked by storm clouds. I thought about the luck of a tornado ripping through, but knew it was unlikely.

“He was demanding some help, but with what, I didn’t know. He was pacing frantically, and at this point, he was coming into close contact with some of the children filtering into the room, so I followed him at a distance.”⁵

I gulped, “It was at this point that he walked through the Staff Only door, yelling about needing some extra help. He seemed hysterical, sort of, I guess, desperate. I followed him and told him that he couldn’t be there, and to step back into the main room. He refused, and stood his ground on the inside of the Staff Office.”⁶

³ He had walked the four miles from his house to get to me. I was his last resort, and my mother had finally taken my car key away from him when he had passed out drunk.

⁴ He was drunk. This was what made him unstable. However, how would a stranger know that about a patron? So I moved around that fact.

⁵ This gets tricky. I went into the back room to speak to Jeff again, who agreed to wait on hold once I told him my father was suicidal, which he was. Two days prior, he had threatened to kill himself in my apartment. There were, however, no children in the Children’s Room this morning, which was an enormous blessing. I needed them here to present some added factor of danger.

⁶ My father is a proud man, even in these moments, when his house has been foreclosed upon, he had bad debt, and repo men were on his tail. He thought it would be more private to talk out of public eyesight. Inside the Staff Office, I asked him to leave, and he refused, so I picked up the phone again and asked Jeff what to do. My father demanded to know who I was talking to. “A crisis hotline, Dad,” I said, and in my ear came Jeff’s incredulity with “He’s there? Right now? With you? Hang up and call the police. This is harassment, and you are in danger.” I hung up. I swallowed. “Dad,” I said, “you need to leave this office right now.”

Both women's eyes widened. My interviewer asked, "Did you have security to help you?"

I shook my head, "No. We did have a red panic button under the Reference Desk, but it would have been too obvious to walk toward it and push it so far from the desk at that point. When he became almost nonsensical, and threatening in the back office, I did call the library's crisis hotline, and someone walked me through the steps to get him securely back into the main area, since he wouldn't answer any of my questions directly." They both nodded, riveted, so I continued.

"I was concerned about the safety of the other patrons, and by now the man was red-faced and getting worse, more belligerent, so I informed him that he would either have to leave on his own accord, or I would be forced to call the police to escort him away. He refused to go at first, indicating that the police would not evict someone from a public place. I reminded him that he was a risk to the children who were clearly growing scared of the situation, and that was cause enough to have him removed."⁷

"He didn't want to leave. I still had no idea what his agitation was from, but I could sense he wasn't well. He rocked on his heels, deciding. Finally, he left, murmuring to me and pointing, but I don't know what he said."⁸

⁷ I knew this rhetoric of removal because my father had refused to check himself into the hospital when he threatened suicide just days ago. I had driven over to help my parents pack before the electricity was turned off. My father had grown wild with despair, drinking heavily, tearing the house apart, and everything in it, including my mother. I thought briefly of taking her back with me to the city. Can you kidnap a parent? I decided that there were enough legal issues at hand, and left her, sobbing. I watched her shake in the dark house with a new kind of hopelessness.

When my father demanded to use my car again, I took him back out to the Children's Room main area. He refused to leave. I watched JoAnne peer from behind *The Babysitter's Club* plastic display series. Her eyes were concentric discs of fear. I turned to face my father directly, saying, "Dad, you have to leave now, you can't have my car, and if you do not go now, I *will* call the police."

⁸ I stared at my father as he stood, rocking on his heels. He wiped at sweat on his forehead. "You know, I thought as my daughter you could help me out just once, but you are apparently so selfish you can't be bothered. Forget it,

The interviewer nodded. “Good for you. So, you never actually had to call the police?”

I shook my head. “No, but I think I would have been forced to had he not left at that point.”

Both women leaned forward, and my interviewer clasped her hands. “Well, that’s a good example. Did you ever see him again? Did he ever come back into the library, that you know of?”⁹

“Oh no. I never saw him again, which was probably a good thing, I think.” I said this with relief.¹⁰

I thought maybe the interview would end here. I had started to sweat, not profusely, but quietly, a little drip down the back of my favorite green cardigan. Just thinking about this memory was nerve-wracking.

“I know what that’s like, I think,” my interviewer said slowly. “Here, we have a lot of the homeless population that take refuge in the building. Most of them are harmless, but occasionally, we see one that’s on drugs, or drunk, or can’t stop harassing patrons. It’s nice to have security here, to deal with that. Plus, that crisis hotline sounds like it was useful. Did the library use that service often?”

I nodded, hesitating. “Well, a little bit, we did. It was very useful, and I think incidents like that helped to encourage the staff to ask for help. That really helped me.”¹¹

forget it.” He turned to leave. I was silent, watching his figure fade as he entered the main lobby of the library, walking past all the co-workers he had gotten to know as a frequent patron himself. He turned before the door and stormed back, pointing directly at me, which elicited some hard stares, “Call you mother when you get home. I’ll be gone by then.” He walked out the door with such a push that a woman gasped.

⁹ He never came back into the library again. This was mainly because he was too busy packing up his house before he was removed from the premises.

¹⁰ The relief was fake. I saw my father a few days later, when my mother left. He was driving their remaining car, dodging the repo man, borrowing my vacuum, and hovering on the edge of insanity. He kept returning in the evenings for cleaning supplies, asking me if I liked grilled cheeses and could we get a bite to eat? The only relief came when he finally took my advice and drove to his mother’s house in Minnesota, where he was forced to come clean with his life: lost job, lost wife, lost sanity, lost sobriety.

“So, Samantha, can you state with confidence that, if necessary, you would have no problem calling the police if a situation arose where you felt that was the next step?”

I thought for a minute about this. “Yes, I think I absolutely would have no trouble doing that, if the situation called for it.”

Both women nodded, each leaning back. The interviewer drank some soda out of the can. “So, is that the worst situation you dealt with when you worked at the library in New York?”¹²

“Yes.” I sat back, hoping to look angelic with my curled hair framing my face. I knew my story seemed tame; I hadn’t even been forced to call the police. I had simply asked an agitated and creepy stranger to leave a room of the library. “I think that I’ve been pretty lucky that way,” I said. “But I think I am capable of dealing with a wide variety of people in a public setting, certainly.” I smiled, trying to crinkle my eyes. “And, for the most part, I think people are so much fun to interact with, I’m up for the challenges of this position.”

My interviewer nodded again. “Well, we’re going to be coming to a close here pretty soon. Can you tell us just briefly about one weakness that you have? And how you work on that?”

¹¹ The help from the staff, who recommended the crisis hotline service, which no one knew anything about until that day, was enormous. After my father left for good that morning, the staff emerged from their hiding spots. Many of them were mothers. One, with tears in her eyes, said, “I heard you tell your father you would have to call the police. That was so brave of you – it must have been so hard. It was hard to listen to.” It was hard, and I felt terrible about it. As the words had left my mouth, I had been astonished.

¹² No. One day, before my father’s breakdown, a man in his fifties, my father’s age, was making a copy in the front lobby and he fell backwards. I was in a set of the stacks, shelving Adult Non-Fiction books I had found misplaced. The man had a heart attack and died almost immediately. People circled around him, and a nurse administered CPR to no avail. As I panned the crowd, I noticed my father standing there. He had his huge Nikon camera hanging around his neck, one of his recent obsessions. It was the middle of the afternoon.

My mouth hung agape at the man turning blue. People were crying, turning away. I watched, hidden for a moment by the shelves, as my father seemed to struggle between deciding to photograph this live event of human passing, or to look for me. He snapped the cover off the lens, and a woman leered at him. He snapped it back on, and came looking to see if I was all right. When he found me, he said simply, “I saw the ambulance, and I panicked. I was out taking some pictures of the canal. It’s almost green.”

I slumped in my seat for a second as answers ran through me: *too headstrong, I hate confrontation, I can't make decisions unless I'm in a crisis.*

“Yes, I can. Sometimes, I can be very shy, and this may add to the time it takes me to deal with confrontation.”¹³

“I see. And how do you work on this?”

“I try to put myself into new situations all the time, like walking around the room as I teach, or going to an art event that I know very little about.”¹⁴

The interviewer nodded for the last time. “I think that’s great. Plus, we have so many community events here in the library that this can be a great start to having you, if you get hired, maybe participate in some of them. That could be a real asset to our department as well.”

I nodded; I was genuinely excited. The sun emerged for a brief second through the ashy clouds of the late afternoon. Kids played with their parents in the park and I could see some of them run to the local pool in towels. They looked so happy.

“This was fantastic. Thanks so much,” my interviewer said directly to me. We all three shook hands, and the note taker mused, “We’ve never had a PhD work in Adult Services before. That will be fun. I mean, er, if you get the job.”

I beamed. I hoped I had said enough to be hired, and not too much to be overlooked. My interviewer followed me up the back stairs, and escorted me out through the front sliding doors. “Well,” she said again, “this was great. I’ll be in touch.”

¹³ I do hate confrontation, mainly because that’s the only way in which I learned how to communicate with my father. I am not, however, very shy. I am quiet around lunatics, or men that stare too long at me. But I stare back. The only person I am shy around is my father, and this is because he has become, in many ways, a complete stranger to me.

¹⁴ Actually, the easiest way to achieve extroversion is by avoiding my father and his phone calls, and by pretending in public that my father lives a normal life. When I truthfully start telling people about my father, I inevitably do become shy, tearing up and blowing my nose in the bathroom.

I walked out into the early evening. The sky was paling against green trees, and as I crossed the street, I watched fathers gathering their daughters and sons into car seats, covering them with warm towels after a long day at the community pool. I walked the mile home, smelling all the backyard barbequed meat simmering on hot coals, wiping real sweat off my brow, hoping I would get the job.¹⁵

¹⁵ I did. My father, who lives in a different state, has not yet visited. I have not yet asked him to, but if he walked through the double doors and headed to the Reference Desk, where I would be sitting, browsing the online catalog, I would greet him, and ask him if he needed any help.

Lyme Disease

* Definitions found in *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* unless otherwise noted. My mother gave me this dictionary in 1994 for Christmas.

Anxious: Uneasy in mind; earnestly wishing. My husband and I always run to make connections in the airport. We book flights that are inexpensive and that land us with ten minutes to spare to connect to the flight that will get us to our true destination: either a place that used to be home or the place that is now home. In either case, we usually end up running through the concourse, anxious to see the family or friends waiting for us. This time, it was my mother who would receive us. And this time, during a bleak, snowy Detroit afternoon, we moseyed. We stopped for a beer. I should have known then what would happen; if I don't end up running at full force toward a destination, I do not want to be there.

Nervous: Forcible: spirited; easily excited or annoyed. When Dan and I get off the final plane, we continue to saunter. I follow a crowd that is moving in the Manchester Airport. Dan redirects me down the stairs. We get into a brief fight; we are both nervous. Visits with my mother have usually caused tension between us ever since her boyfriend died two years ago. She has become needy, less alert to those around her. We move down the escalator, and, sure enough, there's my mother, in a bright red coat that I sent to her in December. She is waving frantically, like we will save her from a tidal wave. My Aunt Barb is at her side. We hug, my mother cries. When tears start rolling down her long, pale face, I start to get nervous. Her eyes are sallow. Her cheeks are hollow. She looks ten years older than she should. My aunt came along for the ride in order to see us. She looks great, trim, pink. We walk to the car. Inside, after we pay the short-term parking ticket and get on the highway toward Lyme, I stare out the window. I try to tell my

mother about my summer teaching job I got back in Kansas. She sighs. She is nervous that I will not ever return to New Hampshire and I am nervous that she will be unhappy when I don't. After a few minutes of this, the conversation turns to birdseed and mice. I swallow. Already, I am nervous.

Uneasy: Disturbed by pain or worry; restless; unstable. At my mother's house, she places her purse in the downstairs den while we put our things in the spare bedroom. When I walk downstairs, she says, "I put my purse in the den. Remind me if I start to get panicky." She talks to the cats and feeds them. Dan and I wander the house, wringing our hands. We are supposed to go to dinner with Aunt Barb and Uncle Keith. By the time we do, my mother has panicked about losing her purse three times. On the third, Dan walks out of the room.

ALS Disease: Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. A progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects nerve cells in the brain and the spinal cord (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis Association). In November, my Uncle Keith, a man who hosted my marriage to Dan on his back lawn, was diagnosed with ALS disease. His legs were going out from underneath him. His right arm was nearly useless; he could barely cut tree limbs for firewood anymore, and he kept contracting pneumonia. Finally, the doctors found the cause. As devastated as Dan and I were, we wanted to keep positive. We told Barb how lucky it was that they have been married for almost forty years, we told them we loved them, we planned this visit. At a nearby diner, finally able to see Keith, he looks weaker, balder, but okay. He jokes, he drinks, he eats a whole pizza. His cheeks are flushed and he gets tired easily. He says he loves us in the parking lot as we part ways. On the drive home in my mother's car, she tells us that she's never liked Keith, that he

used to throw Barb down the stairs. On our way into Lyme, back to her small house, Dan and I hold our breath, having nothing to say and nowhere to go.

Fatigue: Weariness from labor or stress; the tendency of a material to break under

repeated stress. My birthday falls on the second day of our visit. My mother seems to be suffering from a head cold, or an allergy. She cannot stop coughing; it is tiring. She sets out a gift for me: a card and a bracelet. The bracelet says, “Just Be.” I think this is nice. I think maybe we’ll have a celebration this evening with wine and dinner. On errands, she asks what I’d like to have. I reply, “Macaroni and cheese.” She makes it best, creamy and thick. She agrees and coughs. On the way home, we pick up cakes my father has ordered by phone from Minnesota. My mother thinks this is all a big drama: *what could he have sent me from King Arthur Flour Company?* Cakes, I reason. We pick them up: a triple chocolate round cake, and a layered raspberry vanilla. They are beautiful. My mother looks at the receipts left on them and exclaims, “My God! How can he afford this? Who spends fifty dollars on cakes?”

At home, my mother naps. She watches Fox News and sips a drink. Dan and I stare numbly at the television. He offers to make dinner. My mother declines his help. Finally, at eight o’clock in the evening, she offers to make her favorite dish: tomatoes, sausage, and angel hair pasta. I say yes because I am starving. I say yes because I am tired, fatigued, weary.

Trouble: To agitate mentally or spiritually; an instance of stress or annoyance. By the third

day of our visit, I become troubled by my mother’s eating habits. Aside from her coughing fits, she also neglects to eat. I have yet to see her eat breakfast. For my birthday, we meet Barb at a local Hanover pub for lunch. My mother picks at her food and orders the least expensive item on

the menu. She barely touches her French Onion soup. She offers to pay for lunch and lets Barb pay instead. At lunch, the topics include a wedding she doesn't want to attend, the weight gain of a family member, the drug use of another, my father's mysterious behavior, and their aging mother. My mother coughs into her soup until we stand to leave. Outside, she says wistfully, "I wish I felt better; we could go birthday shopping." I stand and see the mountains all around us and witness mothers and daughters gliding by us in the winter sunshine. I take Dan's hand in mine and we walk behind my mother back to Barb's office, where we watch Barb field phone calls for an hour. My mother is not at all troubled to stare out Barb's icy window.

Alzheimer's Disease: A degenerative disease of the central nervous system characterized especially by premature senile mental deterioration. My maternal grandmother has Alzheimer's Disease, and she moved into a retirement community with her husband, my step-grandfather, Harold, whom my mother hates. My grandmother is sweet, with white hair, and she has gotten dressed for our visit to see her new apartment. To ease the obvious trouble she is having with where we have come from, we keep repeating the opening phrase, "Well, in Kansas..." and she nods. She does not know there is two feet of snow on the ground outside but she remembers my name, which is all that matters to me today. Harold says little and elicits Dan's help lugging a reclining chair from the storage unit into their living room. They show us their dining room, the fireplace, the library, the Nurse's Station. It's all very pretty and very, very hot inside. I tell my grandmother that I love her and I search her face for traces of me. I study her intently. On the way home, my mother says, "I cannot believe Harold, saying I never visit. I come over all the time." At home, she calls up Barb to tell her what Harold said.

Agitate: To disturb or excite emotionally. My mother believes that her cats are agitating her respiratory system, and this is what is causing the coughing fits. That, or the wood-burning stove. Or the cold winter. Or the dry air. She says half-sentences until she coughs. She refuses breakfast or exercise. When we go into the Lyme Public Library, she stops and talks to a Lyme resident who leans into me and says, “You know, it’s good to see her, we never see much of her anymore.” My mom is agitated; her face turns red. She sighs and says, “Now, that’s not true. Don’t say that to my only daughter. What will she think?”

Depression: A condition of general emotional dejection and withdrawal; sadness greater and more prolonged than that warranted by any objective reason. When my mother’s boyfriend died, she went into a deep depression. He was carrying a Christmas tree off his Christmas Tree Farm across the street from her house, smack in the center of Lyme. He collapsed and died. It was his heart. My mother’s heart went, too. She has sunk into a pit, saying things like, “The world is not good,” and “All politicians are bad people,” or “There’s no one else left for me out there, I am all alone.” Dan and I try our best, we really do. I tell her of the power of positive thinking. Dan makes her half-laugh in the kitchen. She eats a piece of leftover, expensive triple chocolate cake. She laughs little and coughs a lot. Her depression weaves its veiny way across her temple, over her rough, red cheeks, and maneuvers itself into her lungs, where she tries and tries to ignore it, coughing up rough old bits.

Mother: Something or someone that gives rise to or exercises protecting care over something else. I try to mother my mother, and I fail. I try to give her bacon at breakfast; she turns it down. I ask her if I can make her a doctor’s appointment, and she declines. I ask her to

revisit her therapist, and she replies, “But at my last session, she said everything was fine and I was back to my normal self, that I didn’t need any more help.” I lower my eyelids when she says this, and I try not to pull out my hair. On the long drive to the airport, we pass out of Lyme and its red schoolhouse, its pristine town square, and I have to guide her to the right roads. She nearly misses the exit to the airport; I point feverishly at the airplane icon on the sign and tell her to switch lanes. It’s as if I am teaching her to drive again. I am.

Mother: A woman exercising control, influence, or authority like that of a mother. When I say goodbye to my mother at the airport, I weep. I weep as I am asked to take off my sweatshirt for security reasons. I weep as I walk through the metal detector. I weep and watch her wave from behind the glass. I weep and watch her go; she weeps and watches me go. I consider moving back to Lyme and I know I never will. I consider moving her to Kansas and I know she won’t come. She is consumed by Lyme and its vast fields of family history. I wave until I cannot any longer, and then I order a glass of white wine in the airport bar, and I weep into it as Dan mothers me and we board the plane for home.

Inventory

What is, and will be, is now; I can't forget the sunrise, for it is you, and in that light I find a new way -- Craig Bell, July 5, 1981

On a summer afternoon when I am not yet a year old, my father sits down to write me a letter.

Fifteen years later, I will search a large, sweeping auditorium for my father; he will not appear.

Twenty-three years later, my father will appear at my doorstep, but I will not let him in.

Last week, my father's doctor discovered a nodule attached to his lung – which lung, I cannot be sure. He is safe for now, clear of cancer. In another six months, he will be subjected to another exam, another breath in, out. In, out.

I have kept his letter with me. It lay in the dresser drawer of the lake-house I shared with J., and I kept it in a shoe box with all my other letters when I moved from place to place after college. Today, it rests in a clear plastic bag, folded and protected, in my top bedroom dresser drawer.

The letter is dated July 5, 1981. This date holds no significance for me or for my father, as far as I know. I can speculate that, on the day after the Fourth of July, perhaps he was hung-over and repentant. Perhaps he was celebratory over the birth of our country, or over my own birth five months prior. More than likely, though, he had built me a rocking chair. The letter, which is short and written with a thick black pen, reads in part, “This day gave me special joy; for it was a labor devoted to us. [...] For you, the most perfect rocking chair in the world is finished; but for me, the most wondrous thing in the world is just beginning.”

I remember there was a rocking chair in my room; it was made for a very small person. I remember that I never sat in it because I was afraid I would break it.

When my father came to my apartment in Rochester, what really happened was that he took my hand and we walked aimlessly in the fierce sunshine. He didn't speak for a long time. I was sure something was wrong. The first thing he said to me was, "Mom thinks I went out to get stuff so I could fix the garage door." I knew my mother didn't really believe him. I could not look my father in the eyes. That has been happening all my life, but on this day, it was because I felt pity, not fear.

The only times that I have seen my father cry are when he was telling me how much he loved me. It was always as if he was hit suddenly, unexpectedly, with emotion. His eyes would puff and redden, and he would announce his love for me, ending always with the same phrase: "But I don't want to get maudlin."

My mother visited me in Kansas not too long ago and told me that I did have a sibling, who would be ten years older than me today had she not aborted it at my father's wish. His mother paid for the procedure. The way my mother tells it, my father dropped my mother off in the middle of the night, and picked her up hours later. She told me this after we shared many glasses of wine, as if it could be told only under these circumstances. I was astonished. Mostly, I fantasized about what my sibling would have been like, would have looked like. I resented my grandmother's money. I wished so hard for a sibling for much of my life that almost to get her, and to feel a sense of loss over her, was like losing a loved one.

When I was little, my father sat me down, and we watched documentaries about people with mental diseases – namely, schizophrenia. I used to think it was because he was once a therapist himself, and was still interested in the field of mental disorders. I think now that he was commiserating with the subjects, trying to find distant and secret comfort. This makes me intensely sad.

My father and I also watched *The Wonder Years* together in the afternoons before I went to ballet practice. He was home often when I was in middle school; now I know he was usually in between jobs. We shared a love for the overwritten emotional core of that show. I related to Kevin because his father Jack and my father Craig were similar. They were gruff. They were tight-lipped. They were serious but sometimes laughed, and sometimes they lit up the room. Plus, my mother looked remarkably like Norma, with her bright blonde hair and beautiful, innocent smile.

Nearly all my female relatives have endured abusive romantic relationships. I was told that I would be the exception because I was smart. The aunt at whose house Dan and I were married endured abuse from my uncle, whom she remains married to and whom she insists has changed. I have to agree with her, but I wonder if this is because I don't see the abuse. I spent every summer with them, and they were always kind to me. They had a lake house, and we would spend weeks there, up in the forest on a small lake called Goose Pond. The entire family would be there. My father tried to wind-surf on the lake one year, and I remember watching him finally get up on the water and float away.

When I left J., I did not go straight home. I stayed at a friend's house for a night. I talked to my friend's mother, who helped me see how abusive J. was; he had chased me down with a hammer in her upstairs corridor the morning before. The next day, I took my time leaving. I scooped up Itty, my cat, and I drove home with her loose in the car. I wept the whole way there. I was so afraid my parents would be disappointed in me.

I got out of the car and rang the front bell. The stoop had cobwebs all over it, in all the corners. Everything was grey. I held Itty tight in my hands, and she squirmed. My father

answered the door. Seeing me, his eyes widened, he looked behind me to check that I was alone, and he embraced me. "Come in," he said, panicky. He took Itty inside.

My father was the one who called the police when I returned to the house to move out of it; we were unsure if J. was still there. He was not. I remember arriving, the police officer standing back, watching the three of us. It was a bright, beautiful day on the lake in October. The waves were green and turquoise. My father walked into the house first. I remember feeling secure.

My parents listened to Beatles tapes when we drove to New Hampshire. My father asked me to be in charge of the gas level as we drove, trying to give me something to do. In an effort to please him, I worried over the needle slipping below half. When he asked me to calculate the distance we could go before needing to fill back up, I couldn't do it. I tried but the numbers were always jumbled in my mind, and I watched the clouds and the sky rush by above me instead.

My family dynamic had some wonderful moments. I remember my father holding a can of beer, gesturing and making everyone laugh at dinner in the full, happy house on Goose Pond. I remember him driving me to school when it was no longer cool to ride the bus. I remember that he once stapled my t-shirt sleeves because I had rolled them in an effort to fit in and they wouldn't stay rolled. He bought me my first car. It was a Nissan, blue, and its best trait was breaking down at busy intersections. I painted the NISSAN on the front bumper the colors of the rainbow one summer: a red N, and yellow S, a blue A.

My least favorite memory of my father is one I only heard about; I imagine it in my mind when my mother talks about it. It is when he came out of the downstairs bathroom right before the end of everything, before the foreclosure, before his increase in tremors, before my mom left him. He crashed into the Fairport, New York, map that was framed. I imagine him, shards of

glass in his brown hair, in his skin, the map of his town torn. My mother called me last weekend to report that she had come across the map itself in a box in her new basement. “I burst into tears immediately,” she relayed. “I want to have it re-framed for you,” she told me. I wonder when a family history can be buried or put to rest. I don’t think I could hang such a memory on my wall.

I grew up believing that my family was safe, as most fortunate people do. And I am still fortunate. My father did not die and leave me wondering. I can ask him questions. I try to ask him some lingering questions now, but we are a long way from any answers, if they will ever come.

During my final ballet performance in high school, my father was in Texas. I searched the audience for him, but he was not there. I thought perhaps he would surprise me. His absence was in all the velvet seats. My heart weighted me down.

In college, I performed once more, as a fill-in for a sick student at the studio where I took class part-time. My roommates insisted on coming. I was nervous, stocked with energy. At the end of the performance, backstage, my father walked up among my friends and gave me flowers. *He gave me flowers.*

There is never a sure way to tell my life story. I have tried. I have tried to see and re-see my family. I have seen myself with and apart from them. I can tell you that my fondest memories involve New Hampshire, and I can tell you that I am a lot like my Aunt Barb. My Uncle Keith is slowly dying from ALS disease, and there is nothing we can do to stop it from happening. I sometimes wonder, is this penance for his abusive history? I can’t answer that. His right leg is shrinking before their eyes. Because I live in Kansas, there is a chance that I may never see him walk again. But I will in memories.

I have an uncle, Lee, who helped raise me. He was at my final dance performance. He does not appear much in this collection because I never had to search for him; he was always there. He appears, smiling, in pictures. He was waiting to walk me down the aisle at my wedding, and then my father materialized. The look on Lee's face, and the trepidation on my father's, returns me to my upbringing in one rushed memory. It is like reliving the sense of being in the house with my father and hoping Uncle Lee would show up and make everything okay, which he did for his sister, my mother, almost every Sunday.

I don't know when I might see my father again. Like Keith's shrinking leg, my father's mental diseases and addictions are constantly present, and I cannot do anything about them. But they don't diminish; I watch them metastasize. My father recently had knee surgery, and, when it was over, I called him. I offered to go to Minnesota, where he lives, to care for him, but he refused the invitation. When I called, he was still in the hospital, coming out of anesthesia. He drawled and stumbled, high. My heart began to race: post-trauma rushing in. He thanked me over and over for calling. He said he was all alone, and that he couldn't have been happier that I called. He said that he had to wait at the hospital until the drugs wore off so that he could drive himself home to an empty house. He told me he had to let his dog out. I pictured him alone in a wheelchair, struggling to reach the kitchen cupboards. I often picture this, and the image is so troubling that I have to stop it or else I cannot go on with an afternoon.

When I consider my father, I find myself thinking about something Susan Sontag writes: "Compassion is an unstable emotion." I believe she is right, that compassion isn't constant. There are times when I become ferociously angry with my father, or with my mother who hangs onto the past. I become angry with myself that I cannot open up to my father, who truly has no one. I want to tell him that he has me, but I can't because I am not sure it's true.

I am a lot of things. When I was younger, my favorite song was the title song to the movie *Harold and Maude* by Cat Stevens; its message is that “there’s a million things to be / you know that there are.” My favorite part of that movie is when Harold gives Maude the carnival ring. They are sitting together on the edge of a dock and it’s twilight. Maude sighs and plunks the ring into the lake. “What’d you do that for?” Harold asks, angered. She turns to him and says, “So that I’ll always know where it is.” This is the closest approach I have to dealing effectively with my diseased and human father. I keep him at a distance, but he’s always here.

There is burden and delight in any family history; it is part of the human experience. I continue to learn who I am, and the map is worn. I miss the days when all I had to do was go swimming out to my favorite rock in the lake. I miss telling my own parents about my day at our small dining-room table. When I visit my mother now, we sit at that same table in her new house, and I have brief, intense flashbacks about screaming fights across the cherry surface, or times of joy and celebration. Always, there is wine.

I am one point of a triangle. I used to be a very sharp person. I used to forget the simplest courtesies, like laughter or tears, or how to listen to a voice in distress. With time, I have softened, rounded out. I am troubled by this, because in my family, a smoothed edge might not fit.

Today, I see my father figure into who I am. For so long, I was so scared to inherit my father’s diseases, addictions. It’s true, I probably drink too much. It’s true, I am a perfectionist. For so long, I felt so alone because I was an only child. But now I realize that it’s a lot to juggle – having two individuals, a mother, a father, influence many of my decisions, my life, my genetics. I am grateful for that.

I am grateful for a lot of things.

I visited my mother when she first left my father. She was living with Aunt Barb and Uncle Keith, and one night we all went out to dinner. On the drive home, Barb blared Bruce Springsteen's song "The Rising," her favorite, and we rolled down the windows to see the star-lit winter sky. It was snowing. We screamed the lyrics, trying to get a little bit free.

A memory: it's dusk, and my father has put me in my new sandbox. He is grilling, something he loves to do. Uncle Lee is petting the dog and sipping from his drink on the deck. The lawn is brown, not yet fully seeded. We are outside my parents' first house, their only house. The soil is dry; it's been a good, hot summer. The grill is a new purchase. My father faces me, smiling. As he passes by me, he gently pats me on my head. I feel the trace of his palm even after he's gone. My mother tells me it's time for dinner.