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Deeper Than Roots

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DEEPER THAN ROOTS

By

Braelyn D. Spencer

THESIS

Submitted to
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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

Title of Thesis: DEEPER THAN ROOTS

This thesis by Braelyn Spencer is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Faculty Chair in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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ABSTRACT

DEEPER THAN ROOTS

By

Braelyn D. Spencer

This collection of essays explores the author's relationship with home. The author works through family, death, relationships, illness, and growth. The essays consist of an analysis of rooms within a house, the act of burying loved ones, and discovering what it is to move away. These essays aim to mix retellings of everyday events and relationships with deep personal turmoil and the growth that result from it.

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November 2016

DEDICATION

To my mom.

To my pets.

To new beginnings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to start by thanking my mother. You raised two girls by yourself while constantly battling the darker parts of life. We laugh together, and cry together. You gave me your love of animals and your flair for the making things with not just my hands, but my mind and my heart. And, for this piece, you gave me the permission and confidence to write my story even if it meant revealing things about you and your life to do it. I know how hard that can be for you. Thank you to my boyfriend of eight years, Ged. It's very easy for me to get overwhelmed and anxious when having to multitask with numerous deadlines hovering over me. You have been there for me through emotional breakdowns and waves of self-doubt. I am my best self when you are with me.

Thank you to my thesis advisor, Jennifer Howard, for always telling me the facts and being more patient than I thought humanly possible. You could have turned me away, but you took me on for a second semester. For that, I'm eternally grateful. Thank you to Matt Frank, Dan Gocella, Jason Markle, and Josh MacIvor-Andersen, for helping me build my voice and my confidence throughout our years in workshops. Thank you to my friends, near and far, for being there when I need you. And, last but not least, thank you to the animals that have gotten me through the good and bad memories. I love you all.

This thesis follows the format described by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English

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INTRODUCTION

There is a home for everyone in the world. Sometimes it's the back seat of a white Bonneville as it races down the interstate. Other times, it's the palm of your maternal grandmother's hand as she cups your cheeks and her eyes overflow with pride. Some people have a home from the moment they take their first steps to the time they're laid to rest. Others have to charter ships, buy plane tickets, hike, bike, and swim the world just to have a slight chance of finding where they belong.

In my case, I had to come to terms with the fact that the home I had lived in wasn't what I thought it was. I knew for years that my house and my family weren't like everyone else's, but I lived there till I was twenty-four. Then, I moved out and, without warning, saw where I'd come from in a different light. I would compare the life I left on Valley Road in Negaunee, Michigan to the one I was creating in Luxemburg, Wisconsin. . Instead of waking up to the barks of hungry dogs and the bites of thirsty cats, I woke to the sound of a white table fan and the alarms on my boyfriend's phone as he got up for work. I noticed the difference between living with my mother who suffers from anxiety, severe depression, OCD, and hoarding, and living with a man from a house of five athlete siblings and two all American parents. Models of suburban life. For the first time in my life, I was the one bringing baggage and bad habits home. The daily struggles my mother,

sister, and I experienced when I was growing up weren't an inconvenience, but a catastrophe. From leaking foundation to dilapidated roof, my home continues to fall apart around and beneath my family. It's still the place I run back to when I need somewhere safe, but I've accepted that I not only needed my independence from my mother and older sister, but I need a calm and consistent place to go to at the end of the day.

The property the house sits on has been in the family for a few generations. There's a rule: you can't sell your share of the property to non-family. So, in those generations, it's been carved for profit, sliced down the middle three times over, trashed, abandoned, rediscovered, and rebuilt. There are temporary homes appearing in the woods as family flocks back to nest. The old barn between my cousin's house and my own is even getting electricity for first time. But the new projects and dreams flooding into the acres can't change the history that my house, my yard, and my paths have. Some of the history is good, like family reunions held in the front yard of "The Farm House" (the name everyone in the extended family knows my house by) while my grandmother greeted everyone with homemade bread and pasties. Other memories can't be written down as history because, apart from my mom, sister, and myself, not all of the aunts, uncles, and cousins want to admit to the world that we aren't perfect. My mother has confided in me for years about her depression, the pets killed because they weren't wanted anymore, the sexual abuse from her father, and the ignorance, the indifference of her mother, but I will never know everyone else's side of the story. I could blame differences in age (me being the youngest of the nine cousins by as little as eight years to more than twenty) or distance (four of the cousins live across the country while two others might as well when it comes to my relationship with them). No matter what the

reason, most times, we don't feel close enough to lay our truths on the table, to run to each other when a problem surfaces, or to hand the reins over when we've lost control and need someone else to steer for a moment. Because of this lack of connection, I wrote a lot. If I couldn't confide in the family I had close by, I would find an audience in the lines of the page. I pursued poetry with abstract ideas and vague descriptions. This routine of transferring my feelings onto the page filled my notebooks in middle school. I didn't think of pursuing writing outside of sorting out my internal frustrations until early high school. My teachers recognized my need to write and went out of their way to encourage me. Mr. Wahlman, my creative writing and poetry teacher, made my writing grow. During my free period, he would write passes for my free period instructor so that I could attend his poetry class instead. He didn't require me to turn in the assignments with the class, though he was very enthusiastic when I did. He understood that I needed to be around the ideas, the brainstorming, and the community of writers learning how to exist within themselves and the class.

. In pursuit of my Bachelor's degree, I fantasized being a great fiction or poetry writer, but quickly found that, though I took classes for those genres, the classes I kept coming back to were creative nonfiction. Josh MacIvor-Andersen, Dan Gocella, Jen Howard, Jason Markle, and Matt Frank all had pivotal roles in giving me the confidence to find my voice during my undergraduate years and then helped immensely to, in a sense, give me permission to write about the topics that hurt me as I took on the Master's program. Writing in Josh's God Chronicles class helped me put into words my experiences with religion and spiritual topics, though I've never felt like I belonged to any religious world before. Matt's Creative Nonfiction workshop forced me to not just

look at the paragraphs I wrote, but every word within the sentence. Each word had to hold weight, but be the best possible choice. Dan took me in as his intern and reassured me that I wasn't only good enough to belong in the Master's program, but to help others find the confidence to tell their stories. All this taught me so much about myself, and the crafting of writing that, in the end, it pushed me to write about the hardest subject I've ever faced: my home. Any time a professor would give me feedback on a piece that touched on small aspects of the life we live, I would get positive feedback encouraging me to go deeper, write further, and let all of the words come onto the page, no matter how painful, or who else was included in my stories. I worried about hurting my mother, and my sister. Though I am free to write about my life, it didn't feel right to drag them into my dredging session. However, when I was about to have distance, both mental and physical, I knew I had to explore the aspects of my home life that remained hidden for so long.

To help me in my writing process, I looked to a variety of literature. *Autoportrait* by Edouard Leve introduced me to the raw facts of life and how a writer can bare it all on the page. *The Address Book* by Sophie Calle gave dimension to how the views of individuals can come together and create a mosaic portrait of someone not directly shown within a text. And, *Brain on Fire: My Month of Madness* by Susannah Cahalan was a revealing example of vulnerability of a writer and their loved ones when bringing the reader into a world that they might not be familiar or comfortable with. They all have different styles of writing and a multitude of topics covered, but each book helped to show the ways to develop the character of those that are close to us and our unique crises in the creative nonfiction world.

I decided to focus on three essays each highlighting a different layer of what defines home for me. The essays cover 1) the house I lived in, 2) the land and my connection to it, and 3) the urge to propel myself into change. Though, I want this thesis to go beyond that. To me, it's about growth, fear, honesty, and the act of loving one's faults. I hope that each reader finds something they need, something to carry with them.

It was very hard for me to build up the motivation to take on this thesis. It required me to open myself and my family to world and all its critical eyes. However, it is my pleasure to share this thesis with you now.

Be kind to yourself.

PART ONE:

“... where the heart is.”

This room used to be my grandparent's when my mom was five.

I'd like to think five-year-old mom dreamed of different things than I do. Maybe images of theatrical women brandishing blades. Heights were no challenge for them. With a fluid leap, they'd propel themselves to the sky and land with one toe on a high wire. Fire didn't intimidate them. They'd smile and wave as hoops were set to ignite in their hands.

Or, maybe she dreamed of living on the edge of sunflowers sturdy enough to balance castles on their petals. As the sunflowers stretched their stems, spreading their petals and leaves to look for the light, she would hold onto the doorframe as her castle broke through the clouds.

I hope her dreams were so saturated with color and adventure, the fire in her stomach so intense that she would confuse it with a tummy ache as she woke in her covers.

I'll never know that little girl.

One night, she lay in the bed, sleeping next to her baby brother, in the room across from her parents' bedroom door. She woke up from whatever world she lingered in to the sudden intrusion of her father's fingertips in her underwear. No shimmering blades. No high wire act. No sunflower to lift her to the clouds. The feeling stirring inside her had nothing to do fiery hoops or sunflowers. She held still, not understanding why her nooks and crannies were suddenly so interesting. She glanced over her father's shoulder and watched as her mother's silhouette walked back and forth behind their bedroom doorway in her nightgown.

Her mother stayed in her bedroom, her brother turned over next to her in his sleep, and she died a little on the inside as her body turned to a shell and her father killed the girl I'll never know.

Now, in the bedroom where my grandparents slept, my mom and I share a full bed while my sister sleeps in a cot next to us. But, though we all sleep in this room, I wouldn't call it a bedroom. A bedroom should be a sanctuary. You hang pictures of your friends, family, and pets on the walls, on your desk, or tacked up on a cork board. The cork board might hold the concert tickets from last summer, the dried up flower from a bouquet addressed to your mom, or pins you buy two for one at Hot Topic when you finally have a chance to go. You have a desk for doing homework and a Goodwill armchair purchased for a whopping ten dollars, your favorite place to curl up on a cold day with a thick blanket and a thicker book. There are candles on your window sill for chilly nights and a tall metal fan in the corner for the hot ones. You tape posters of Panic!

at the Disco and N'sync to the walls, duct tape Christmas lights to the ceiling, hide your secrets in a shoe box in the back corner of your closet or under the loose floor boards.

Instead, the bed I share with my mom is worn down around my hip area. I call the indentations "butt craters". The wall paper is ancient and tearing. The door catches on the carpet and has holes scratched out from years of pet escape attempts. When I toss in the night, I wake to the smell of cat turds and with an extra puncture from the springs. Next to Brin's cot is the litter box for two of our twelve cats, and just beyond that is the boarded up closet where those two cats pissed their way up and down our tucked away memories. That might contribute to the smell too, but I don't notice it as much anymore.

Sometimes, when Mom and I wake up together on the weekends, she tells me a few of her new dreams. She's in a room trying to find my sister while she holds me in her arms. Or, she's in a crowd trying to push closer to a stage she doesn't know with a singer she's never heard of, but the singer turns and is her high school crush. He reaches out for her as the crowd parts and she's lifted up. Perhaps they embrace with such force that they lose track of where one hand ends and the other's begins. If she dreams of my grandfather, she doesn't tell me. Maybe she isn't followed by those memories anymore now that she has her daughters acting as her dream catchers. I'd like to think that the magic behind the woven surface is amplified when the webbing is made of blood instead of string.

I want to tell her I dreamed of a time where my sister and I weren't born. In my dream, she moved to California or New York, and made her way up the actress ladder. Her name was known by all small town girls with homes filled with drunken screams.

She was successful, and loved, not just because of her infectious smile, but also because the fame never stained her heart. She was a starlet who made it without needing to bare her curves or let producers fondle them. She held on tightly to her small town kindness in an industry ruled by men and dollar signs. She opened doors for new generations of powerful, talented women, and slammed the doors on her skeptics.

Then, when she was ready to slow down, she had kids who became lawyers and doctors, and she retired on a beach somewhere with warm sand and cool breezes. She painted all day long and went to sleep on a pillow-top mattress with a man who loved her. I want to tell her she had a house with a circle window over the door and the garden in the back, just like she's always wanted. I want to tell her , if I had had a choice in how her life was going to play out, I would have sacrificed my love for stickers, the feeling when a boy first told me he loved me, and the years I invested in school just to give her a future where she escaped this place, these scars. She didn't have to settle for men that couldn't see her beautiful, weary soul. She didn't have to contemplate giving up gardening. She didn't have to sacrifice herself for her daughters. That would be enough for me to float through the galaxy as a shadow of a person who could have been.

Elbows on knees and eyes glued to my cellphone screen, I try to drown out the world around me. I don't want to be bothered while I use the restroom, but that isn't a guarantee in our house. If I focus hard enough, there isn't a scraping sound coming from

a cat pushing the door over the warped laminate floor. One. Millimeter. At. A. Time. There aren't any ignored piles of cat hair in the corners, most of them housing the kind of spiders you don't make eye contact with as a sign of submission. And there isn't a muffled buzzing coming from the system in the basement saying that we've lost water pressure. Instead, I sink into a music video someone posted on Facebook and fall, feet first, into an ant hill of videos: a cat chasing a black bear across its back yard. A compilation of cats eating ice cream and stopping in the frames with a sudden brain-freeze. An animated short about a dog that loves junk food, but loves his human more. A BuzzFeed video about people getting drunk and given puppies to play with. Next. Next. Next. Before too long, I've taken a few wrong turns and wind up gasping as I watch a video of children dying in other countries, because of water, war, and winters.

I hear a push and feel a gust as the door is thrust halfway open. My cat strides in, puts his paws on my knee, and waits for me to pick him up. At the same time, the music from my sister's video game echoes in through the doorway followed by frustrated swearing under her breath.

It's my fault. When I was younger, I thought it would be a good idea to try and lock the door to our burnt orange floral wallpapered bathroom. I wanted to trap myself among the rows of empty wipe containers on the floor and the peeling flooring. I could hide away while counting which webs had living spiders and which had dead ones. The goal was to get some privacy. A lot can build up when you have social poop anxiety.

In middle school, hours would go by with no trips to the bathroom. When a chance was presented, I'd excuse myself. Unfortunately, it didn't matter if I was the only one in the bathroom. Heck, it didn't matter if every bathroom on that entire floor was empty. I just couldn't bring myself to go. *What if one of the cheerleaders comes in and recognizes my shoes? Do I vary my shoes enough that they won't know it's me? Do they notice what I wear? What if I farted too loud? What would be more embarrassing; squeaky or cannon fodder? What if it smells? They can't know that I fart loud.*

It was unacceptable to be a healthy, functioning human being. Way too embarrassing. I made that mistake once before.

I looked forward to my eighth grade year. Not only was it the last grade before moving up to the high school, but it was the year that students could take Environmental Adventures class, E.A. for short. Younger students always heard stories from upperclassmen about rock climbing and overnight camping trips. Compared to the thrills of Humanities, Health, Math, and Science, E.A. sounded like a gift from the school district Gods. When it was my year sign up, I was elated. Not only did I get into one of the few spots, but my best friend, Sarah, was accepted as well. I excelled at how to start a fire, track wild animals, pack a proper camping pack, filter water, identify harmful plants, and bust open rocks to find geodes inside. I'd jump that the opportunity to help whoever I could understand the tips and tricks to getting each new skill permanently carved into their mind. Anytime Mr.D, our teacher, had to stop to wait for silence, I made it my personal duty to stare at people from the edge of class. Though I didn't need anything else keeping me from connecting with my classmates, I didn't care. Then came the big day: Rock climbing day. We had practiced putting on harnesses, using ropes to pull each

other up trees, and anchoring ourselves to catch someone if they slipped. Now, we could impress all of our peers with gloat-worthy athletic abilities. Well, everyone but me. I yelled and pulled my rope until I had driven Sarah to the very top. Then, when it was my turn to climb, I got a third of the way up before I screamed, clung to the rocks, and begged them to bring me down till they lowered me to the beautiful, safe dirt. Horrific is an accurate descriptor.

The best part was after. Girls that have hit puberty can attest that some awkward, uncomfortable things happen when a period hits; bloating, cramps, nausea, sudden increased appetite, mood swings, frequent and uncontrollable bleeding, and gas. Unfortunately, most middle school boys are under the mindset that farting and belching is a “boys only” activity, except if you are their sister. Sarah and I had decided that we were going to take a breather after my unfortunate experience on the rock wall. We walked along a path leading away from class and towards the “bathroom” area assigned for the students. At the branch that lead to each gender’s respective dump zone, I saw two boys from our class. They were warm, laughed at our jokes, and told us their own. I want to say the jokes were memorable, but I was distracted by attention from boys. It was a welcome and uncommon for these two guys to even talk to me, let alone get along with me. I laughed, holding my side while wiping tears away, thinking that they might want to hang out sometime, then, PHHHHHT. The explosion that escaped my behind echoed through the small clearing. Both boys looked up shocked, “Oh my god.” My face went red hot, my arms got ridged, and I ran. I darted through gaps, hurdled rocks, and wedged myself between a tree and a rock outcropping. Sarah caught up to me, sat beside me, and tried to talk me out of my new house. I wasn’t leaving this spot. Not for a million dollars.

Not for nuclear holocaust. Not for anything. This was my home now, this cavern of complete disaster. Kids talk. They would each tell two friends, then those two friends would tell two friends, and then, in the time it would take me to walk from the front door of the school to homeroom, everyone from the principle to Loreen McDerble's second uncle would know about my posterior expression. I didn't want to face that.

I was lying though. I left that spot when the teacher came to where I was crying and reprimanded me for leaving the group.

Turns out, when I tried to lock the door, I signed myself up for years of having company while I poop. Whiteface, one of our older adopted cats, would take advantage of anyone pooping. Since he could push open the door himself, that meant anyone trying to go number two would have to hold him for the entirety of their bathroom visit. His favorite position is he stands, you scoop his butt into the joint of your left elbow, then you lift his chest with your right elbow, wrap both arms around him like a safety harness, and hold him close to your chest. Well, until you used water. Later, that open door policy turned into an invitation for the human roommates to come in and freshen up during bathroom time. Since the kitchen and bathroom sinks don't work, they stand next to me and use the tub to scrub their hands, fill the coffee pot, rinse paper plates and cups for other meals. Most times, they are so close to me they could sit down on my shoulder to do their chores.

When Mom finally decided that the toilet was just too gross for her, she started to join me for bathroom parties: I sit on the toilet while she talks to me about this latest

episode of *Marvel's Agents of Shield* we are watching while squatting over a plastic coffee container to pee.

I sit in the only cushioned chair and watch my cats try to hunt a mouse. Though I can hear the thunk as this particularly voluptuous mouse lands, I never worry about my cats interrupting. One cat flies between my feet. Another sits on the arm of my chair. The mouse isn't scurrying on the half carpeted floor in our living room with the cats, but is diving, and rolling amongst years of mouse, bat, squirrel, and snake excrement above our heads on the office style ceiling tiles. We used to be able to watch their outlines leap after, catch, and feast upon flies while the cats watched below. After a few years, and potential water damage to the tube lights, we now rely solely on the sounds of feet scurrying and frantic squeaking to picture the chase scene playing out. We've adapted. I spin my seat as the scampering travels across the room.

For light, we precariously place desk lamps on the floor and hope the chandelier-style light in the sunroom doesn't give out. Though, nowadays, it's less a "sunroom" and more a cave. Eight giant windows once allowed the sunlight to pour in and warm the damp bones of our home, now are cracked, missing panes, covered in plastic, and insulated with thick throws. It keeps the living room cooler in the summer, warmer in the winter, and distant from curious eyes.

Eight Christmases prior, an “anonymous source” contacted Child Protective Services for Christmas.

I was used to the walkways we wore down in the carpet between overflowing tables and Jenga-style piles of boxes.

On the table next to the television, my mother made meticulous mounds. Old newspapers went in one stack, bills went on another, and everything in-between would fill the gaps. On the floor, boxes of paperwork from a desk in our last house are placed upon boxes of my middle school memorabilia. Those boxes are stacked on an estate sale chair covered in cat hair and stains that could be the remainders of a dried hairball, or something else entirely. The mystery was not knowing what you’re seeing till you get a few inches away. When there weren’t shelves or desks available for my things, I picked the closest chair and made that my new nest or claimed the dining room table (which acted as our t.v. and video game stand, dining table, and computer desk) as my daily dumping ground. We all had our messes, some more filthy than others, but we all respected the other’s piles. No one would touch your stuff for fear of reshuffling the order and making it impossible to find something again. Or, worse, if someone were to knock your pile over, there would be no knowing what landed on the carpet that’s sticky from years of hidden piss spots and forgotten hairballs.

Many times I would come home from school to find a box of my stuff placed on a chair. Mom would come in, “Sorry Brae. Whiteface tried to jump to a sweatshirt on the top of your stack. I tried to pick it up in the order it fell in. Everything should be in there, but I would check the floor near where it fell to make sure I didn’t leave anything

important.” That’s to say, she didn’t want to have mistakenly left something among the wrappers, empty tissue boxes, and scrap paper I refused to pick up. I would exhale, “It’s okay, Mom. Thanks for grabbing my stuff.” and know I wasn’t going to be touching that box again until I needed something. When that time would come, I would be thrown into my frantic “find it” mode. My chest gets tight, my hands shake, and my anger rises to a millimeter below the surface. The first dozen times, Mom would offer to help me only to be shot down. I didn’t want her help, even though she was going to obsess about it till I found this particular shirt, or a necklace I needed to have that moment, or the book I had from a previous class. Sometimes instead of just giving me my space to tear apart the living room, she would circle my piles, trying to spot anything close to the surface that could end my frenzy. Occasionally, she found the item and I would begrudgingly thank her. I wanted to find it so I knew where it had been. When she wouldn’t, I would plead with her through clenched fists and deep breaths to not touch my stuff and to leave it. Leave the room. Leave the obsessing. Leave me. If anyone was going to obsess over finding my lost shit, it was me. After that, the only thing that would ease my feverish hunt would be the flood of relief when I found what I was looking for. It wasn’t swallowed up in the junk pile abyss. It wasn’t thrown away by accident. It wasn’t behind some couch to get pissed on by the cats. It was right here, in my hands.

This was my life. I knew it wasn’t the way my friends’ houses looked or how they found missing jewelry, but that was just a difference in lifestyles. That is, until we got the visit from Child Protective Services.

They came to school and the secretary gave me a “poor baby” stare as I went into my interview. I don’t blame her. How else was she supposed to react when CPS comes

asking for a student to be called to the office for a private meeting? I sat across from a woman with a clipboard in a room down a hallway I'd never been through. I told truths, but whether they were half or whole wasn't going to be clear to her. I hadn't told any of my family members how bad our house had gotten. She wasn't going to be the first one to know. Especially after she thought my father had negatively affected my home-life before his passing nine years prior. He was dead. Of course it negatively affected my home-life, but don't try to make it more than it was. He didn't make this mess. I left her sitting in the office, left the secretaries at their desk, and kept my anger close. What she got from our conversation, I didn't really care. All I knew was I didn't like feeling as if everyone in the office suddenly thought I was a child who went home to a beating every day and skipped breakfast every morning. Mom didn't beat me or starve me. Brin didn't dangle me from trees by my ankles. What did she expect to happen? Did we have a problem? Yes. Did we need help getting to a healthier place? Of course. But I refused to think that this was in any way helpful. Instead of calling me to the office, igniting assumptions within the staff, and bringing me into a room to talk with a stranger about my home life, maybe they could have just talked to my mother and I. We could have gotten a summoning where we would get penalized if we missed. We could have talked about the hoarding, the depression, the struggles, the falling apart house, the disheveled yard, and how to fix it with a counselor. Or, better, the family member that called in on us could have pulled us aside that Christmas and said, "Hey, guys. I love you very much, and am concerned about you. I know that you guys have more going on than you are letting the family know. I just want you to know that I want to help you anyway I can. If you need help cleaning, I'll be there. If you need something repaired, I'm your man. Just

let me know. I won't push my way in, but I really want you to hear me when I say that you deserve to live in a better situation than you are right now." That's expecting too much though.

Instead, I spent my time meant for testing out presents and sledding with friends taking turns with Brin loading up our beat up purple sled with as many boxes as it could carry, dragging it to the barn, and stacking our shipment onto the frozen concrete. At first, we tried to sort through everything before packing the boxes, but as the CPS kept pushing to get through our door, we abandoned all organization. The dialogue shifted from "Does this go in a paperwork box or a recycle box? Should we shred it?" to "Will it fit? Then shove it in and get it out." Anything from dishes, paperwork, furniture, and clothing in garbage bags to photos, my father's clothing, sculptures, and presents from family went out to be frozen. When the floor was at capacity, the upper level was filled.

In an effort to save the planet, we collected all of the plastic bottles, tin cans, pop cans, milk jugs, yogurt containers, and newspapers in our house. Most of them made their way into the second floor. You can love the world so much you wind up drowning yourself.

By the end of the purge, we had a cleared out living room. I felt relief when I could walk into the room without shimmying sideways around corners, but I could tell that the same waves weren't touching my mom. She sat, there, not bothering to look around at are roomy quarters, and didn't smile. Her hair was in a bun, bandana tied around her forehead, and her eyes vacant of excitement or joy. I'm sure she was sort of happy, somewhere under the surface, that cleaning was finally done, but the result wasn't ideal. She was stuck with the fact that one of her siblings didn't have the balls to come

and tell her she had a problem. There was no consideration, no courtesy. She was stripped of her power.

I'd say it takes a week with someone that is obsessive to notice that control is a big factor. If I were to go to Mom's stuff with a box and tell her, "You have thirty seconds to get all of this junk into a box and you'll win \$100", she would probably do it because the money would make a difference, but she'd instantly panic as soon as the deed was done. Not only would she wonder if she shuffled things out of their intended order, but that stack would quickly be replaced by another. As time would go on, she would forget what was put in that box and have anxiety anytime she remembered something important might be among this pile that, at first glance, all looks like garbage. Forcing her to clean under a time crunch does fix the immediate problem, but it doesn't help her understand what makes her do it and how she needs to handle it on a daily basis. It doesn't help. It doesn't solve anything.

PART TWO:

“The Spreading of You”

I didn't know what to wear when I got up this morning. People don't tell you what is appropriate for spreading someone's ashes. I mean, it is the closest thing you are going to get to a funeral. You're the first uncle I'll say goodbye to. I considered putting on an embroidered top with dark, wrinkle-free pants. I wanted to be formal, but I didn't know if dressing up would be appropriate for stumbling through decades of overgrowth and fallen tree limbs. You would have thought it was laughable I even worried about something like what to wear. You'd be sitting in your recliner sipping on your fourth glass of straight bourbon on ice and snort, “Not like I'll be there to give a shit, Heehaw. I'll be dead.” Which, you would be right. Even though you and I didn't have the best relationship in life, I knew you'd tell it how you saw it. You used to call me “Ragginfraggits,” but after hearing me say I'm a pack mule, it changed to “Heehaw”. That time, I thought the name was funny and fit well. Other times your nicknames weren't appropriate or appreciated. You just would see a situation worth seasoning and sprinkle your views into the mix. That kind of “tell it like it is” attitude was easier to handle. I always knew what you thought about politics or football, who you were upset with, and what frustrated you. And, being your niece, I could go home if you went too far. So, keeping you in mind, I chose something comfortable; loose workout pants and a

t-shirt hiding under an NMU sweatshirt. You didn't think much of my school choice, but I wore my colors anyway. I double checked my purse, sweatshirt, pants, and hair before I left the house to make sure there wasn't cat hair. I could do that for you.

Movies get close to having tutorials for what could happen when spreading someone's ashes, but they are always filtered, pinched, pulled, and shot from glamorous angles.

For example, a movie is coming to a tear-filled ending. A woman is left alive while her husband of thirty years has passed away. She's standing on a bridge where she exchanged first glances with her husband. She cradles an urn close to her chest and stares off into the water below as a single tear rolls down her cheek. Sullen music fades into the scene as she opens the container, slowly leans over the railing, and releases the fine powder of him into a perfectly timed breeze. The ashes don't just fall, but are carried up like an ethereal cloud. The music gets louder as she whispers out a last goodbye with a promise that she will continue to land on the East Coast every winter and the West Coast every summer with his picture in her back pocket. And, as the sun shines through her husband's ashes, she smiles and finds peace within herself as she moves on, letting go of the pain, the sadness, and the past while uplifting instrumentals get louder and the picture fades out.

I know that my life has not, nor will it ever be, as well executed as the movies. I don't hit my marks or deliver my lines effortlessly. If the movie was about a twenty-something girl running into low-hanging cupboards and sharing too many personal

details with strangers, maybe. I don't have wardrobe and make-up artists to doll me up until my complexion is flawless. Instead, I wear waxy Chap Stick and throw my split-ends into buns hidden under baseball caps. So, instead of trying to make this gathering something artificial, or rehearsed, I just stuck with being there with you to the end.

Something about the weight of it all mixed with my always persistent pull to the warmth between the covers almost convinced me that you would understand if I hadn't even gotten out of bed this morning. I wouldn't have to stand there as the family mourned so publically. It felt forced and uncomfortable to think us trying to work through a death and spreading your ashes while standing shoulder to shoulder. We rarely bare ourselves, our vulnerable selves, to each other.

When you were alive, you had to be drunk to discuss anything deeper than frustration. You and my mom would sit at your house until two in the morning drinking red wine, trying to figure out just where your lives when wrong. Mom always came home sick from too dark a wine and too deep a grief.

I couldn't stay in bed though. Everyone who could come, came. California, Ohio, and Florida loaned us the pieces of our family that had scattered, dispersed itself within different streets and counties. Our family gathered together for you. Despite the family feuds, despite the waring values, they came to say goodbye.

As I left the house, I made sure I brought all the necessities. Phone? Yep, got it in my right pocket. Warm layers? Yep. No need to get a chill. Camera? Yep. Different lenses? Of course. It sounds weird to bring a camera to such a depressing event, but I needed to document such a rare occasion: My family coming together like a family.

You could tear down my house and I would move on. Most of my possessions are either replaceable or can be recreated. But this land acts as the eternal resting place for generations of cats, and dogs along with a fawn, and one baby mouse that have been loved and lost. My grandmother buried pets here. My mother buried pets here. My cousins, aunts and uncles buried pets here. We have poured years of memories and heartache into these creatures then, when they couldn't be with us anymore, put them as close to our doors, to their homes, as we could. The ground that holds them is something sacred. We mark it, protect it, and look to it. If there are two loved ones buried there, double the protection and the wound. Three? Triple it. Four? Quadruple it. It goes on and on like that until we are left with a graveyard hidden at the bottom of trees and tucked next to rock outcroppings. Every one of those little people is your baby, but you have to keep walking.

I look down to the edge of the drive way. Genzi, Uriu, and Tiger, are buried side by side under a pine tree. They aren't alone. There are marked and unmarked graves stretching from their pine tree down passed the old sauna and the sealed up well to the end of the drive way. Little offerings sprinkled among the apple trees and the "Picker" bushes. I know they are there, but their names are lost to me.

Genzi was Brin's first cat and her baby. When we moved from Republic to Negaunee, our landlord said that we could have a cat, but Genzi had to be exchanged for a fixed female. So, our Aunt Pauline gave us her kitten and we handed over Genzi. Until the months before he passed, he remained her cat. There were a couple times when he would disappear for months and my sister would bring him back to Pauline. But as he got closer and closer to the end, my sister and mom took him in. He got IV bags of fluid since he didn't understand that bowls of water were for drinking, not standing in. His mind was undergoing a vicious battle with, my guess, kitty dementia. He would stare off into the distance as he stood in the middle of the dogs' water dish. I'd call his name while he watched the place where the paint chipped off the cupboard. I'd go to move him and his legs would stay locked. He was vacant.

On the last day, my sister watched as he laid on the carpet, filling with water from his I.V., desperate for nutrients that he no longer had the strength to search for. Some animals are in denial as they get closer to passing. They run and play, taking breaks to let their bodies catch up. Genzi relaxed as we slid him into the patch of sunlight and I took pictures of his eyes. I wanted to remember what he looked like, even as he died. Brin kept her distance until Mom accompanied her to the vet. Then, as they injected him, Brin held his paws, stroked his fur, and soothed him with whispered praises.

"You're such a good boy. I'm right here."

Tiger and his brother came from an older couple that Pauline had known while teaching. They had to move and couldn't bring their two cats because of a sudden

developing allergy to their dander. We took them in without debating if it was a good idea. It didn't take long before he was Brin's favorite. Maybe it's because she had to give up Genzi years before. Maybe it was just the pull of his bright green eyes and his soft nasal cry. All I know is that he just had to wap me with his claw-less cotton ball paws, and I'd wind up holding him for the rest of the evening without ever realizing I'd picked him up.

I wasn't there when he died. I was in Wisconsin for a month, trying to see what it might be like to live with a boy. For some people, that's easier. Being away when a pet dies. It's just, one day they are there and the next, they aren't. Just get a new cat. For me, it made a week of sudden break downs stretch for three months. It sounds ridiculous and over-dramatic, but that's the truth. I couldn't stand the idea of not being able to say goodbye to him, not knowing where he was buried, not buying him Culvers crinkle fries as his last meal, not getting to help him in his last hours.

Brin claimed Uriu as one of her two cats Pauline's cat's litter. After that, I picked two and Mom picked two. It sounds kind of crazy, a house with three dogs and six cats taking on another six, but it's easy for us to become completely paranoid about animal abuse. Maggie Mae, the kitten's momma, was a victim of that herself before my Aunt got her. After weeks of worrying about potential psychos taking our kittens, we just skipped the heartache by taking them ourselves.

When Uriu died we didn't know she was dying. One day she started to act sluggish, uninterested, and laid on the floor of her room breathing heavily. We'd sit next to her, try to help her balance, then ease her back down as she cried out, too tired to try anymore.

Within two days of her getting sick, my mom and I had to wake Brin up to tell her that Uriu had passed away. She missed it. She just had wanted a few hours of sleep. She missed her kitten dying. We brought Uriu's body to the vet. Though they couldn't do anything to resurrect her, they were able to give us the answers we needed. She had a genetic mutation that caused her lung to suddenly collapse. It broke our hearts twice. First, our poor little kitten suffocated while we scrambled to think of what might be wrong with her. Second, we wondered how many of her siblings had the same mutation.

All of them are buried in some sort of wrapping: Uriu's plastic from her autopsy, the box with Genzi sleeping on sheet pieces, and Tiger's crocheted hat made by my mom. They needed to be loved in death equal to the love they had in life, celebrated as gifts that were cherished and then given back to the world to keep for eternity. They're there so they won't be too far away from us, or each other. No one should ever have to be alone in the dark.

Paulsa buried her Newfoundland, Lancer in our front yard, just up the driveway from the pine tree, in front of our lilac bush. My mom tried to convince me he wasn't laid to rest so close to the house, but I remember when we opened that place for him years ago. I wondered why my aunt decided to stray from the tradition of keeping graveyards in the backyard, but instead wanted her dog to be a hidden ornament for the natural garden that grows in every summer. I wondered if he could sense it when the utility trucks drove above him over the years of downed wires. I wonder if she too needed to keep her pets as close to the front door as possible. I was little then, so I didn't say anything, but I still

expect flash flood to pass over our property and leave Lancer's excavated remains exposed in the yard as the waters wash away the lilacs.

In the backyard is the patch of lilies Mom planted over the baby mouse, Jayden. She found him one summer after she almost crushed him taking groceries in from the car. Her theory was a momma mouse had been transporting him when they pulled up in our purple beast of a car and, for the sake of surviving, dropped the little hairless baby down by the back left tire. Mine is that our old beater was their house and, when we moved it after a few days of staying home, the mother mouse panicked, trying to evacuate the babies as fast as she could. He was small, hairless, and his eyes hadn't opened yet. My sister fed him using formula and a baby syringe, and protecting him was her fulltime job. She slept in an office chair in our living room, batting away curious paws. After a week taking care of the little peanut, he died in his basket. My sister cried like she had just gotten news that a long lost love had perished in a plane crash over the Gulf of Mexico. It turns out he choked on the bedding that we didn't know he was chewing on.

Mom transferred his body into a small woven basket lined with grass from the backyard. While the dogs slept, she slid out the back door with Jayden in one hand and a bag of lily bulbs in the other. Between her garden housed in the foundation of an old workshop and the exposed bluff, she buried him then blanketed him in the bulbs. He didn't die on the rocks in the heat. He became part of my mother's daily chores. She watered his grave and he bloomed again.

Along the dirt trail leading to the back field is a small apple orchard. It wasn't planted by people, but was an accumulation of animal deposits and human composting over the years. That's where my mother buried the fawn that Olive, my Uncle Jay's dog, killed.

The wounds had been too deep. Its mother had been pacing in the tree line in the distance as my mom got Olive away, contacted the DNR to see if we could save the fawn, and, finally, as the fawn died. Mom left it there in the orchard uncovered overnight so the mother could feel and see that there wasn't any life left in its eyes, in its chest, or nose. We laid the fawn under a protective layer of rocks, quartz, and small boulders that jutted out of the outcroppings. The coyotes couldn't dig her up while she slept.

Just as you enter the clearing the family has always called "The Field," there is a small circle of garden edging on the left marking the grave of our cat Jerusalem. It sits on the edge of a swamp next to a big pine tree and blueberry-patch.

She wasn't ours at first. We adopted her from our cousin Laura when she needed to move to New Orleans and couldn't put Jerusalem through a move like that after being able to live in the open in Marquette. When she first moved in, my mom, usually a lover of all animals, nicknamed her "Psycho Cat." She had a look in her eye that made us question if she was tame. She never put up with anyone's crap, and was willing to turn you into flesh strips in a moment's notice. But, it didn't take long for my mom's animal charmer instincts to kick in. She'd hold out her hand and let Jerusalem analyze. It only took a few breaths to know if you were allowed to proceed. When she was allowed to

touch her, she'd only touch her head and parts of her back. If she moved too fast, it'd be over. As time went on and my mom gave her space, Jerusalem became her new favorite. Any time my mom was sitting in the living room, all the other cats knew she was not to be sat with if Jerusalem was close by. I never realized that fact until Jerusalem had passed and the cats that didn't usually sit with Mom were batting at each other for a chance to snuggle.

Looking back, we think Jerusalem died from cancer. We never got her checked out (money was always the main factor in our pet's deaths), but the rate at which the tumor grew from a small pellet to bleeding wound left little to the imagination. We knew she would die, it was spreading too fast, so we made her comfortable and loved right up to the end. She reverted into a kitten self we never saw as she got closer to her last moments. She would purr through the pain and cry softly as we held her wrapped in blankets. I was happy that after her death, but before her burial, I was able to find the small pink cellphone pouch she adopted as her baby and bury it with her. It was lost, pushed back under a dresser. I don't know how long she had been looking for it.

The path splits into two at the blueberry patch. If you veer right, you go down a short, torn up path that leads down to the house Pauline had built after she retired from teaching, the house Uncle Stu lived in after you moved up from Illinois, where Maggie had her kittens, and where we could see evidence of Stu's failing health. If you go left, you enter the biggest section of the field. On the right side of the tree line that re-enforces the grassy edge of the property are three of the most identifiable graves on the entire 40 acres of family land. First is Pappi, my cousin Laura's cat, marked with a small sign stake

engraved with just the name written. Next to Pappi is a disproportionate cross made out of logs to show where my cousin Amy would have laid her dog Vega to rest. And, finally, to the left of Vega's cross is a giant, three pillar, decorated tribute to my Uncle Jay's dog Olive. Each pillar is a different height with two wood rods sticking out of each. Some rods have hanging ornaments, others have room for additions. On the top of the tallest pillar sits a stuffed Stimpy doll from the *Ren and Stimpy* show. You wouldn't know to look to the left of it to find two more hidden mounds under the shade of an old oak tree as the summer sun glides across the sky.

Marcy and Angel sleep there.

Marcy was buried first. She was Paulsa's German Shepard, but she was my best friend. I would get off the bus in elementary school and look up the driveway to see a patient figure, waiting at the top of the steep hill. I'd make my way up, trying not to lose my breath, and Marcy would make her way down, meeting me halfway so we could make the last of the climb together. She died years later after eating pieces of carpet and socks until her intestines got blocked. The vet couldn't get her through the surgery, but sat with her afterwards so she wouldn't be alone. I regret not helping my mom bury her. It was the death of my first best friend. How could I see her curled up in a plastic bag? How could look at her? I told my mom she'd have to do it alone. And she did, in the middle of winter.

Angel was the most difficult for me. She was adopted by my little family along with her sister Maggie. When we adopted them, her name was China. Brin changed it to Angel after she saw two white streaks falling from her shoulder blades down to wrap around her sides, like wings. A few years before Angel died, her nails started to grow abnormally. Instead of wearing down like Vega's or shedding off like the cat's, hers grew and grew until they curled to the edges to let her walk. We didn't know what to do, cutting them normally was near to impossible, so we just struggled to try and keep up with them; filing, cutting off a little, filing, cutting off a little more. One day, for a reason unknown to me, Angel was unable to walk anymore. I would find her, tipped over in snowbanks or wedged between the wheelchair ramp and the drifts. Her nails were still an issue, but her legs would lock and keep her from walking. I moved her to blankets on the floor with puppy training pads under her. She could not eat or use the bathroom upright, so I would feed her as she lay there and clean her after she would mess herself. That was the easy stage of her death.

After that her eyesight went; she would fly into a crazed panic when trying to eat or drink, desperate for the nourishment. Her body ached, I would sob as I changed her bedding, her wails echoing as she tried to bite my hands away. I exhaustedly gave her baby aspirin and melatonin to ease her pain while making her sleep. She died as I watched a show an afternoon. The thing that alerted me to the change was the silence. She didn't howl in pain. She didn't whimper. She just gave in and left her body.

I dug for hours the next morning to prepare her grave. The sun didn't ease its rays. The bees swarmed in the hive twenty feet from where I sat. I carved a little deeper and

the roots got a little thicker. I'd leap onto the shovel, drive it down farther, and hit another rock the size of a potato.

I wrapped her body in the blanket she died on and carried her dead weight to her hole, trying not to let her head come out of the covers. She was rewrapped in freshly bought throws. I wasn't going to bury her in piss-soaked blankets. My hands were shaking as I put the first shovel full of dirt and rocks onto her. "I'm sorry, Angel. I'm so sorry." Second shovel full of dirt. "Please forgive me. I never wanted you to get this bad." Third shovel full. "No one will go through this again." Fifth shovel full. Eighth shovel full. Fifteenth. Twentieth. The longer I buried, the more I hated myself. It doesn't matter if I love the pets I have if I let them waste away. She died because we tried to heal cancer with baby aspirin and broken legs with love.

Pauline and Judy didn't come to your wake. Well, the closest thing you wanted to a wake. The group, made up of your kids, your grandson, your ex, your nieces, their kids, their husbands, your little sister, your little brother, and I, make our way up to the blueberry bush, past Pappi, Vega, Olive, Marcy, and Angel, and into the depths of the property. We follow the worn path to the second fork in the road. One that leads to the deer blind you made your grandson Alex, just past the old snowmobile, and the other leads to the camp you and Jay made when you were in your late teens or early twenties. We take the one to Alex's blind. We make our way up the hunter orange leaves and down

to the rock edge where you and Jay built your own deer blind years ago. Those who don't feel comfortable going down into the gully stay next to the little run down shack you plastered with signs that warn unfortunate travelers of radiation, government property, and hidden surveillance cameras. Jay holds saplings as he navigates foot holes he'd almost forgotten. Peter shifts back and forth between leaning on his sister and leaning on your walking stick. And I ease myself over down trees, overgrown weeds, and slick moss to the grove where you had spent hours staring at does wishing for that beautiful twelve point buck to make his appearance in the cold.

As Peter gathers himself I stare as each person remembers that we are gathered here today to lay the last pieces of you on the ground. We are here to turn you into a place.

I know you tried to be in my life. I was a niece that was a few decades short of growing up with your kids, but a decade too early to grow up with your grandson. I sometimes kept my distance and didn't always enjoy helping you shovel out on the days school was canceled. I was a bit too sensitive for your rough humor and I often had odd interests you didn't understand. But, you taught me how to hook up the mower deck to the riding mower, the difference between the screwdriver heads, the proper ways to handle power tools, how to build a deck off the back bedroom, and never to handle a crossbow while drunk. You were kind to me when it counted.

Like, when I was younger and we came to your wife's funeral. The funeral director saw me after the ceremony completely infatuated with the wooden butterflies scattered among the oranges, whites, reds, and yellows of the flower arrangements. He

gathered them up and gave them to me. Unfortunately, Sue's daughters were flabbergasted I got butterflies that should have been given to their children, her rightful grandchildren, first. They carried on and on and on until all but one of the delicate butterflies were flung to their children's hands. I was crushed, of course. It's not that I had needed to have all the decorations to myself, but that these women had to make such a stink while I was there. Their mother was dead.

When we got back to your house, the adults hit the wine and I wandered. Turned out it was the first and only time I would ever see your home in Sandwich, Illinois. As I explored all the nooks and crannies, you dealt with the pain of losing part of your life. You saw me later. I must have looked defeated or depressed, maybe I was upset that the butterfly situation had happened. Whatever it was, you saw me and brought me to a coin box and said, "Go ahead, Ragginfraggits. See what kind of stuff I've got in there." It was a lot of coin for a little girl, just enough to get me out of whatever fog lingered around. It's one of my favorite memories of you. You noticed me.

I am hit by your absence quietly in my head. Others cover their mouths with fingertips stretching up towards overflowing eyes. Those not moved to tears lean against trees to look off into the distance. Shannon makes a bed for you out of a bucket of daisies. Unlike Jay's usual attitude of throwing out a well-timed joke, he's leaning against a tree watching each daisy fall to the ground. Amy, usually upbeat and singing, is getting red cheeks and folding her arms. We can hear quiet laughing from the overlook above. It must be an elevation thing. Sadness sinks.

Peter finishes and we open the giant pouch of you. One by one, we bury the daisies in you. I hesitate at first. The first person pours you out of the bag, but Amy then asks if she can fill her hands and sets the mood for all mourners who follow to do the same. For the relationship we had in life, usually business-like get-shit-done attitudes, it feels too personal to plunge my hands into you and be so close. When I do, I can't help but notice the consistency of you. You aren't the light powder that the movies lie about. You are grainy, like taking handfuls of partially broken down seashells. I can't smell anything from the pile in my hands, but I'm half expecting the entire bag to reek of bourbon. Most people are 70% water, but I think you were 70% booze. Bits go under my fingernails and I wonder which bone it was: sacrum, humerus, clavicle, ulna, femur. For the first time in my life, I am reluctant to let you go. I don't want to throw away your hands, your head, your knees, your legs, your arms... But, you slide out from between my fingertips and land with the rest of you: unmarked.

Instinctively I clap my hands together after the last ounce of you leaves my grasp, then rub my palms against the sides of my pants. I stop immediately after I 'm done. I just rubbed my uncle onto my pants like leftover salt from French fries.

PART THREE:

“From Afar”

It might be paper, but I hold it like gold leaf between my thumbs and pointer fingers. I rub the edges not caring if I get a papercut. I wish that the Secretary of State had a shelf of perfume bottles filled with everyday scents. That way, as you leave a licensed driver, you can decide if freedom smells like rose hips, puppy breath, or, more appropriately, gasoline.

I leave. No, I stride. I glow. Everyone else is there renewing their license or getting new plates, but I'm leaving an adult. I have dealt with twenty-four years of not having any say. There were no going long distances spontaneously. It was fine in the first eighteen years, but when a college student needs everything within their world to be in walking distance or a bus ride away, life can get complicated. If the weather was bad and my mom didn't have a car, I would slump into myself as I texted a cousin or aunt for a ride to the bus stop. On the good days, I'd wake up three hours before needing to be somewhere. If I gave myself an hour to walk to the bus, I wouldn't get too winded. Ten minutes to get from my house to the end of my road. Twenty-five minutes to get from the end of my road to the bus route. If I had extra time, I could make it to the Immanuel

Lutheran Church. I never had extra time. Then, I needed two hours to do a couple route changes, but still wound up having to wait half an hour before class started.

The worst days were when juggling no transportation, having a job and class seemed impossible. I would have a shift at six o'clock in the morning and no bus or parent vehicle to help me get there. So instead of asking for a different shift, I ground my heels into the dirt and decided that I would just ask my cousin's husband for a ride since it's on his way. Getting out the door by twenty to five didn't sound like that big of a deal. I would just go to bed early. Yeah. Go to bed early. In all of middle school, high school, and all stages of college, I never had nailed down the whole getting to bed at a decent time thing. So, as I should have known, I would fall asleep between eleven at night and one in the morning only to be woken up at ten after four. I'd get to campus, trudge up the desolate walkways, navigate around the building, and curl up on the stoop just outside the staff entrance. The door opened automatically at six in the morning, but the stock boys let me in. I only had to wait five minutes. Then, in the half hour before my superiors got there, I would nap on the couch in the dining room. I admit that scaring my older coworkers as they turned the light on was an essential benefit of the commute. Nothing like a good scare to substitute for a cup of coffee.

The alternative was asking friends for rides. They were always so nice about it. They offered to pick me up, drop me off, hang out for lunch, do stuff after class. All I kept thinking was that I was the biggest gas syphon ever. I couldn't do much to help with all the expenses that came with driving a car around town all day, but I tried to buy food or Starbucks whenever I could afford. I worried that every kind soul that put up with me

would start wondering where my relationship with them ended and the one with their passenger seat began.

No more. As soon as we leave the Secretary of State, I drive to a classmate's house and move furniture into my car. I start feeling hungry, so my mom and I go through the drive-thru at McDonalds for French fries. Not because I have unfinished business or classmates to bid farewell, but only because I can drive and I'm going to get some damn French fries.

I pull up to the bank on McClellan, my best friend Chloe's work. I told her if I passed my test, I would be moving that same day. She confessed to me that she hoped I'd fail the parallel parking section and have to stay in Michigan for another few months, but here I am.

I walk in and see her at the drive-thru window. Her co-workers see me and give knowing smiles, "You must be the friend." They say it nicely, but I can't help feeling they know more about her inner feelings towards my move than I do. Maybe it's the way the edge of their smiles fall flat, or the twitch in the corner of their eye. She probably warned them this morning that she might get upset and asked them to ignore her. Either way, I know I will make her cry.

She turns, coming towards me. "So, did you pass?"

I want to smile, but I know that it's not good news for everyone, so I look down at her outfit (*she looks nice*) and nod. Her inhale falters a little, "You're leaving after this, aren't you?"

I nod again, “Yeah. I packed last night.”

I don’t want her to break down at work. “Don’t worry. I’ll only be three hours away.”

“I know. We can’t hang out whenever we want when you’re there though.”

“Only we can destroy the friendship, the distance can’t.”

There are things that I could say to encourage her more. Like, “I don’t want to do this, but you know I have to” or “I could put it off for a year while I hunt for jobs,” but I wouldn’t mean either of those and she’d know it. I have been waiting to move out since before I even had it as an option. I was tired of living in my house with my mom and sister. I wanted to have a house, a room, and a job that I could call mine.

She’s scared and I understand. The first anniversary of her mother’s death just passed. I move today, then her sister will move a month later. Both of us are heading to Wisconsin. Both of us need to run from something. Her mind will tell her that we are abandoning her, leaving her to fight her demons alone, just like her mom did. She told me over the last few weeks that she’ll fight it, the feelings of being abandoned. I reminded her that I wouldn’t have been there for her during her mom’s days in the ICU if I planned to abandon her. I want to stay for her, for late nights drinking, for Mario Kart races, for sitting in her car till three in the morning crying about my mom and her mom. I want to stay for bookstore runs where we can’t afford the books but the smell of them is free.

I have to go though. We hug. I close my eyes and squeeze. I feel her shoulders jerking against me. I try to slowly pull away, but she holds me still. I open my eyes and avoid looking at her coworkers as I ease her off of me. I can’t linger in sad moments. Sunsets, fireworks, and slow dances are for lingering.

“I’ll text you when I get there. Okay?”

She nods. I take a step back, turn, and leave her standing in the middle of the room trying to piece herself back together.

Time seems to slow and speed up all at once after I pull up to the house. I run around trying to piece together twenty-four years of life and fit it all into the back of my Subaru Outback. I have to leave two bins of books because I don’t have room. I pack more clothes because you always need options. I grab my electric kettle, my owl mug, and all my shake ingredients, haul the bins that are staying to the attic, and fill multiple reusable shopping bags with “but-what-if-I-need-it’s.” I rummage through the containers I’ve already packed up and realize, in a concentrated dose, I’m a very sentimental person. I knew that I hoard things. From receipts to clothing, I hold onto it all. It doesn’t matter the clothes fit. *What if I lose weight? What if I can make it into a blanket or pillow case in a few years? What if I could save it for my future daughter?* But, while packing and repacking, I found things I’d forgotten I hoarded: beanie babies from childhood to high school, letters from family and friends, and envelopes of pictures fill small cardboard boxes.

There’s one picture of my mother with apple blossoms in the background.

It sounds very sophisticated and elegant to friends when I say it like that, but my mother hates the picture. I had been trying to capture her in a way that translated the

dampness of the day while shining a light on the beautiful pillows of petals behind her, but instead got a wonderful shot of Mom crying out as a branch made a fort in her hair. I just love it. It's my mom. She isn't worrying about her hair or her teeth or her birthmark. She's just reacting naturally. It's also worth mentioning that her face is hilarious. Thankfully I also have nice pictures, but when I compare them side-by-side, it's hard to pick the "flattering" pictures over "When Apples Attack." I just can't do it.

There's one of my dog Vega with a snowy scene behind her.

Again, sounds lovely and well executed. At first, immediately after taking and printing it, I would have agreed with you. It looks like she is smiling. Those are the kinds of pictures that suddenly creep into your Facebook feed and you can't help but like, comment, and share it before scrolling on. Vega is out of focus while the snowflakes in front of her are in focus. A happy accident. Because of that, I first thought she was smiling with her eyes shut and her tail wagging. Come to find out that it isn't her tail; it's a giant steamy pile of crap. I, no joke, got a picture of my dog smiling after taking a mammoth dump in the snow. I keep a copy of it on my fridge.

It takes me a couple hours, but by two in the afternoon I'm saying my goodbyes.

I go through the house giving every animal a kiss and hug. "Goodbye Cobalt, Dorian, Whiteface, Jacamar, Kodiak, Bijou, Panda, Delphia, Lumia, and Vega. I'll miss you." They don't say goodbye. I understand though. Goodbyes are hard.

Hardest is the very last one: my mom. She has two daughters and I'm the first to leave. She's never had to watch a child pack up before. As I run upstairs and down, I see

my mom keeping her distance. I fling scarves, yarn, head bands, books, and jewelry into shoe boxes and shopping bags. She glances from tables and through doorways as I tear out the heart of my piles. She's itching to offer her help, to solve my problems, but she waits for me to ask. "Mom, have you seen my second gray reusable shopping bag? The one with the removable bottom." "Where can I put these boxes before I go?" "Is it okay if I leave a mess on the sofa?" I condense fourteen years down, sort each year appropriately, and seal them each away in the attic. Elementary school report cards? Packed. Middle school art projects? Filed. High school papers? Tucked away. I try to clear myself, every scrap of me, out of the way. No matter how hard I try, I can't get everything packed and stored. For me, I feel like I'm leaving things for my mom to purge later, another thing to clean up, but for my mom it probably makes my absence more noticeable. Instead of seeing my school books teetering on the edge of the printer and my purse thrown onto a living room chair, there will only be various pieces of paper and small labeled totes. Like leaving a coat on a chair, it'll hold my place. It will remind them that I used to sit here, read there, think here, fume there. No Braelyn sitting at the living room table to write another workshop piece as my mom watches *Longmire* on Netflix. No bonding time sitting in the hammock under the apple tree while drinking Mike's Hard Lemonade. No long nights trying to enter REM sleep as I rip the plaster from the ceiling with my snores.

I don't want to know how hard today is for Mom because it's plenty hard for me.

I have no right to these rooms or this house anymore.

I walk out the back door with the last arm-load and hustle to my car. My mom and Brin walk out behind me. I don't know if they feel like I'm rushing, but I am. I don't mean to run. Though we aren't perfect, they are two of the few family members that I can come to with insecurities and doubts. Mom has sat up with me late into the night because I was stressed and have horrible time management skills. Brin has threatened to hunt down people that cause me pain. They love me, so I walk faster. I don't want to linger long enough to break down and call the move off. If I turn around to stare into Mom's eyes, she will break down. Right there, under the dying plum trees, she'll lose it because it's starting to rain and that won't stop me from leaving.

“I guess that's everything for this trip.”

“Yeah.” Mom looks over the contents of my car through the windows. “I think you got the essentials. We'll take care of what you've left behind.”

I'm trying to look over the boxes and trash bags in the back of my car. “I know. I can always come back if there is something I need or forgot.” A fine mist starts to coat my arm hair. I look at them in small intervals, not holding a gaze with either of them for more than ten seconds.

“Perfect timing. Looks like it's going to rain.” Mom holds out a hand briefly then tucks it back in under her arm. “Let me know when you get there.” She looks over me, to the hood of my car, and then back to me. “Make sure you pull over if it starts raining really hard.”

I hug her tight, locking my hands behind her back. As I feel her squeeze tighter I pull away.

I hug Brin for a moment. Thankfully, she isn't one for physical contact. She gave me a hug when I graduate from high school, so I consider this hug my goodbye present.

It's hard to push a pedal down when you know that it will propel you at rocket speed out of childhood. For every pothole, a little more innocence is funneled out of the tailpipe. For every mile, a pinch more responsibility filters into the passenger seat from the vents.

At first, I don't really feel the weight of adulthood settling on my breast bone. I shift in my seat and find the position that might work for the next three hours. I check my mirrors and adjust the blowers to guarantee a comfortable drive. I turn on wipers, double check where my light controls are, and realize that I'm already halfway through Ishpeming. Reality sinks in. My hands are shaking. I'm about to drive one hundred eighty five miles by myself on a driver's license that's only about to celebrate its five hour birthday. I don't know how long to look at my speedometer. I don't have the timing down when it comes to effortlessly change stations on my satellite radio without sliding into the left lane. Part of me wants to talk to my mother for the entire drive down, but it's not very flattering to detach from one home only to drag your umbilical cord behind you. That, and I probably shouldn't cause a crash before getting twenty miles from home. Maybe that's just me; always thinking of how I look in the eyes of the world, always wanting to be strong, independent, and creative without the advice or guidance of anyone. Mom wouldn't see me as weak if I gave her a brief call. Another part of me wants to have a few hours of silence to analyze the gaps between my fingers as my knuckles turn white.

I pull out of Ishpeming. I'm taking this trip alone.

I don't regret not picking up the phone. I had picked out cd's before leaving my house. It mostly consisted of Avril Lavigne, Evanescence, Beyoncé, and Britney Spears. All of my other cd's were crappy quality mixed-tape types and would have me constantly having to adjust the volume. Not a good idea. Though, among the punk pop, alternative rock, and pop icons, I had Kelly Clarkson's first album, *Behind These Hazel Eyes*. I think I remember purchasing it because, not joking, my eyes are hazel. As I reach a 70 mph speed limit road my chest is aching, one hand is on the wheel, and the other hand is gripping the hair above my right ear. *Here I am, once again. I'm torn into pieces.* Kelly Clarkson is sitting next to me, talking to me. *Can't deny it, can't pretend. Broken up, deep inside, but you won't get to see the tears I cry. Behind these hazel eyes.* The passing cars don't know that the girl in the Subaru is on the edge of disaster because of a twelve year old song and a twenty-four year history. *Swallow me then spit me out.* I want to reach out and grab at their mirrors. *For hating you, I blame myself. Leaving you it kills me now. No, I don't cry on the outside anymore.* I'm passed by mini-vans, RVs, and Semis. They don't really care though. They aren't worried about hydroplaning or washed out roads with the sprinkle outside their windshield, but any water makes me on edge when I'm struggling to see beyond my glasses.