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WALKING IN WAVES

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WALKING IN WAVES

By

Sarah David

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
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For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

WALKING IN WAVES

This thesis by Sarah David is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Interim Director of Graduate Education.

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ABSTRACT

WALKING IN WAVES

By

Sarah David

The following thesis consists of a story collection, the majority of which are flash fiction pieces. The thesis consists of two sections. The first section, “Walking in Waves,” is composed of stories about familial relationships and the balancing act of motherhood. Some of these stories play with unique formats or degrees of speculative fiction. Many are rather lyrical in nature. The second section is a novella-in-flash; entitled “Tiny’s Jazz Magic,” this series of stories tells the tale of a woman and her young daughter in 1920’s Storyville, New Orleans.

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Thanks also go to my parents and sisters, who have been forced to listen to my stories for an exceeding long, and sometimes painful, time. Thank you to my husband, Eli, for his endless support, and to my son, Rayden, for being the inspiration behind many of these pieces. May your curiosity never burn out.

A few of these pieces have been published or accepted for publication prior to April 2017. “With These Three Hearts” appeared in *Thrice Fiction* in April 2016, “Under the Apple Tree” was published in *Harpoon Review* in January 2017, and “Homeless in Hawai’i” is forthcoming in Issue 8 of *Firewords*. This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Elves.....	7
With These Three Hearts.....	8
Telephone Poles.....	12
Under the Apple Tree.....	14
Three Weddings in March.....	15
Shakespeare is a Poor Alternative to Counseling.....	16
Homeless in Hawai'i.....	17
Beaches and Pilgrims.....	18
In Which You Become Invisible.....	20
In Which You Are More Visible than You've Ever Wanted to Be.....	21
The World Will Never Know.....	22
Sunny Hills Women's Health and Birthing Center, four parts.....	27
Moon Shadows.....	31
Wear Your Heart.....	34
The Toddlers.....	41
Reverse.....	42
Novella-in-Flash: <i>Tiny's Jazz Magic</i>	43

INTRODUCTION

There are three badges I wear eternally: writer, teacher, and mother. I do not think of any of these as simply a job. There is a magic in the way a writer paints a picture the same way there is magic in the way a teacher or parent scaffolds the world for another to learn and grow. In all of these instances, the right words can take a simple moment and build into something life altering. I know I do not always have the best words, far from it, which is one of the reasons I used to be very, very quiet. Over the years, however, I have learned that the perfect word does not matter as much as the passion behind it. This is why teaching and writing go hand in hand, at least in my life. Neither teachers nor writers put away their work after leaving the office, tucking files into folders, and brushing the day from their hands. Neither do mothers. We wear these badges day and night, and even in our dreams.

Though it sounds cliché, once my son was born, I understood that motherhood really is a full time job. But you cannot quit this gig, it does not come with benefits, and regulations regarding overtime simply do not apply. Clearly, I was in over my head, as are all parents. We can pretend we know the unspoken rules or the perfect way to perform an unwritten task of parenthood, but, honestly, we are all winging it.

I wanted to convey that struggle in writing. I had the idea that I could bring together my different badges: teaching through writing, writing about motherhood. As I started my thesis, I planned to incorporate a variety of components, including stream of consciousness, lyrical language, and elements of the speculative or slipstream genres. As with parenting, not everything went according to plan; however, also similar to parenting, I learned a lot, I grew a lot, and I developed miraculous endurance.

Despite some struggles, these past two years have been an incredible experience, both in and out of the classroom. Living in Marquette, my family and I have had the chance to be part of a beautiful, tight-knit community. We have met people I hope will be lifelong friends. At Northern Michigan University, I have worked with amazing professors and peers in the fields of writing and academia. There were evenings when I struggled with how exactly to balance my Teaching Assistantship, graduate coursework, thesis, and online high school teaching job while raising my son. I think survival involved a combination of caffeine, willpower, humor, fresh Superior air, and my amazing husband, who, despite working seven hours away, made it up here most weekends to give me a break. Despite all of that, there were days when I considered throwing in the towel. I read giant theory books while rocking a sick toddler, took calls from my virtual students while at the Children's Museum, graded essays at the beach. There are moments I am proud of and moments when I thought my family and friends deserved more of my time. There are also moments when I needed more of my own time.

In the end, though, I have learned a lot about balance. I have also learned a vast amount about the genre of flash fiction, which brings me to my thesis. I am always writing. Sometimes the words are only recorded in my head and they fly away like chuckling seagulls. Other times they are stored in my dumb phone and sent to friends in accidental, incoherent bits. Once in a while, I remember to jot them down. Even then, I cannot guarantee they are not drawn over with crayon, with Dr. Seuss stampers, with mac'n'cheese. (My son, Rayden, is my ever-constant companion.) Still, somehow, a decent chunk of writing did manage to find its way to the page unscathed over these last two years. Much of that has become the following.

Through my thesis, I hoped to study and discuss relationships, particularly parental relationships. I wanted to address the juggling of motherhood, a career, and basic self-care: a trio

that seems difficult to manage. Prior to beginning my degree, I had been drawn to examples of writing on the topic of motherhood, but most of the writing I found on the topic of life balance was located in “chick lit” books or “mommy blogs” with titles like “Scary Mommy” and “Working Mother”. Although I read literature featuring characters who were mothers, it was difficult for me to locate novels with a literary spin on the struggle to balance motherhood, career, and self-care. I knew literary authors of this balance must exist, and I wanted to discover them, and to write fiction that could join their ranks.

I hear overwhelmingly from new mothers (friends, acquaintances, and strangers alike— behold the magic of social media), that they are overwhelmed by needing to meet all of society’s expectations. We not only have to be loving mothers with genius children who can use a toilet by 18 months and read independently by age 3, we must also be excellent, though accommodating employees, environmentally-conscious housewives, and skilled lovers. Many young mothers leave their jobs, at least temporarily, not because they dislike their careers but because they cannot justify making an income that does not cover the cost of daycare or cannot make eye contact with the other women who belittle them from missing out their children’s precious first experiences. Others are gradually given fewer, or less important, duties or benefits as a way to phase them out of a job legally.

Maybe this burden has existed for some time, maybe it has always been present, but I can really only speak from my own personal experiences and the stories I have heard from others around me. This challenge to be the best at everything seems to create an odd void in our world when it comes to young mothers in any field, particularly in academia, where travel, an increased workload, and unusual working hours are often needed to get ahead. This is a void I hope to explore through research and nonfiction at a future date, but one I dive into wholeheartedly in

fiction. I have learned that it is certainly humanly possible to be a working mother in graduate school. It is not easy, but it is possible, and there are many reasons, mostly listed above, for why I think writing about motherhood is most needed.

I also felt that something was missing in this topic, that there was more to explore through writing, and, maybe, that the writing could reach others who would typically tune out at the mention of “fiction about motherhood.” I also wanted to make people think about the ways that women, and mothers, are ridiculously strong. In particular, I remember a group of female teachers gathered last summer at NMU’s summer writing institute, the Northern Shores Writing Project, women brought together by their shared love of teaching and writing. We shared our stories together as well as the struggle to find balance in our lives and power through our own words. We felt our lives pulled in many different directions, and melding our loves of writing, motherhood, and teaching was a daily challenge. Despite the challenge, we were willing to try. This inspired me further to emphasize female characters, usually mothers, in my writing.

As I mentioned earlier, I write quite often, and sometimes, the words actually make it onto paper. I revise when the images are still forming words in my head, then I jot them down in a rush when I find a scrap of paper or a chance to access Microsoft Word. I revise again as the words appear on paper, replacing and erasing until my writing is concise and direct, and the images on the screen or on the sheet are the ones I needed. The sometimes-unusual formats, moving imagery, and all-around weirdness I attribute to both my desire to experiment and challenge my writing as well as the reading I have done these last two years. Preparing the proposal for my thesis last spring, I was uncertain which novels, craft books, collections, or guides would be the most helpful in my journey to write weird, occasionally speculative, flash

fiction about motherhood. In the end, however, I think books from both my list and beyond have played a role in inspiring me and guiding me.

Books that grounded my understanding of flash fiction and novellas-in-flash include the original *Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories*, The Rose Metal Press *Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction*, and *My Very End of the Universe: Five Novellas-in-Flash and a Study of the Form* from Rose Metal Press. I also read *Several Short Sentences about Writing* by Verlyn Kickenborg, which drew my careful attention to direct sentence structure and focused imagery. Two flash-focused workshops with my thesis advisor, Professor Jennifer Howard, also built immensely upon the (very basic) memory of flash that I had retained from one undergraduate flash class I had taken at UW- La Crosse nine years ago.

Authors like Aimee Bender, Charles Yu, Angela Carter, Lucy Corin, Edgar Allan Poe, and Stephen King, not to mention many others, taught me to be playful, weird, and sometimes creepy, with my writing and voice. Mia Alvar, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jose Saramago, Maggie Nelson, Gwendolyn Brooks, Kate Furnivall, and others provided me with countless examples of how to paint pictures with words and pull readers into a story with emotion and grace. Recently re-reading Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and other Modernists, I experimented with stream of consciousness and arrived at a half-run-on-stream, where I avoid the occasional conjunction or article or present an unexpected thought at the end of a sentence. Reading for *Passages North* and seeing what drew editors to a piece as well as what turned them off taught me an unfathomable amount about writing stories. I have met new favorite authors and books during these two years.

My thesis is organized into two sections, though similar imagery and themes connect the two sections. The first section, which earns the thesis title “Walking in Waves”, demonstrates my

practice with flash and nearly-flash-sized pieces in a variety of formats. This section includes some speculative elements in many of the pieces as well. The latter section, “Tiny’s Jazz Magic”, is comprised of what I hope will someday become a novella-in-flash about a young African-American woman and her daughter and their struggles and joys in 1920’s New Orleans.

I chose my thesis title, “Walking in Waves”, for the image it conveys. The idea of moving back and forth through water, sometimes with, oftentimes against, the tide, is a powerful metaphor for the walk of womanhood and motherhood. The imagery of tides and water has become common in literature overall, but I believe it is one worth returning to with a fresh perspective. I hope to present a new spin on ordinary situations through the work of my three badges: mother, teacher, writer.

Elves

One Saturday we stayed in bed and took turns playing Skyrim for ten hours straight. I wore a nightie with those silly fuzzy panda socks and you wore low-slung sweatpants. We ordered pizza and you didn't flinch when you opened the door and winter blew in. You said maybe we're ready for kids because, look, here we are, it is Saturday and we're not going out. I said maybe you're right. We didn't know what kids meant; we were so young our skin only creased where we fold. We paddled through our own responsibilities and the oars never broke. I watched the prints your horse left in the snow down the mountain trail and wondered what the elf would find in the darkened cave.

With These Three Hearts

Northern Michigan is a gateway, a dessert, a hovel, a refuge. Like most abstractions, it depends on perspective. Moving here from Southern California, one would guess my parents had a fresh perspective, yet they chose to see the grime under my boyfriend's fingernail and his lack of fancy degree when he came to their door with an engagement ring. After bitter screams (mine and my mother's) and embarrassed grunts (Dan's and my father's), we took off down the gravel road, two eighteen year olds without a destination, one finger wearing Walmart-bought cubic zirconia, thumbs pointed south on I-75.

Tucked safely in their northern refuge, my parents had convinced themselves of the error of my ways. Our ways. Everyone else's ways. And time passed.

*

There's a time of the day just after the sun dips below the tree line that the world appears both darker and more clear, as if with the lowering of God's dimmer switch, He clicks the phoropter at the optometrist's office in the sky.

Dan and I choose this time to drive: 300 miles north and west.

I suspect it isn't so much a decision as a necessity. We were supposed to be at my parents' by nightfall, but worked later than expected. We have to leave now or wait until tomorrow. I keep my tidy work clothing on. My curly hair remains thoroughly secured atop my head. Knowing it will only lead to further upset if we arrive after the nightly news, I urge my husband into the car and tuck myself into the passenger seat, one arm wrapped around my melon-sized belly. I settle in uncomfortably. I'm not used to the contours of my growing body.

I haven't spoken with my parents since before the wedding. Since the engagement, really. Now we are headed down the deserted rural highway to see if we can change their minds. I'm not exactly eager. My father loathes confrontation. I've inherited that trait from him.

*

Three miles east of who-the-hell-knows, we pass a sagging, steel blue building. It's long and narrow, with four or five doors open to the evening shadows and the crisp wind. A stained mattress and a pile of limbless wicker furniture lie across one open doorway, a dented tin garbage can in front of another. It's one of those places that make me imagine its history, its present. I wonder who lives there, picture a broken-hearted middle-aged woman, her passion snatched from her after years of bad luck and hardship; a rabid alcoholic husband, disdain his other favorite drug. I see their fights, their struggles, their poverty; I see expired spam on white bread, mice and spiders sneaking into corners, rooms with dust-coated boxes overflowing with every little possession that might be worth something, maybe worth something. Every thing is worth hanging onto when you have nothing.

*

If I really thought about it, I'd realize my parents never truly had faith in me. I first learned to ride my bike without training wheels when I was eleven years old. The other kids laughed at the extra wheels when we took our bikes into town. We lived on the edge of a cliff over a river. My mother hissed threats of broken bones and broken futures if I so much as mentioned riding on two wheels. I kept the trainers on. She always knew I couldn't do anything myself. I suppose I'd surprised her when I finally tried.

*

In the car, a stranger kicks my left kidney. I've heard you really only need one. I rub my belly. "It's like a peace offering," I say.

My husband laughs once, brisk, his eyes on the road. One hand combs hair out of his face.

"Don't be nervous," I say. I am nervous. I talk when I'm nervous. "I'm glad I married you, you know. I wouldn't want to be with anyone else. Not with some poet type or a philosopher."

"Why not? Wouldn't you have more in common?"

"If I'd married another writer, we'd probably have killed each other by now. And I don't mean that metaphorically." Outside the window, a crow stalks the gravel side of the road, shifting the leg of a dead animal with its beak. "I need a man who knows physical labor. I'll do the thinking."

He tips his chin. "I feel there's an insult in there somewhere..."

"No, no." The road looms in front of us like the final stretch of a marathon, though we have miles to go. "It's definitely a compliment." I squirm and think about looking for a bathroom. There's nothing but trees and deer for miles. And birds picking at decaying things.

*

The first time I went deer-hunting, I got lucky. In the rising mango orange of a brilliant cold November sunrise, a 12-point buck stepped in front of the fallen logs that made up my stand. I breathed in and out slowly, watching my breath in the crisp morning air. I aimed the rifle and squeezed the trigger, squinting my eyes and ears against the sharp noise and sharper recoil. My father thudded his hand on my back as we looked down at the fallen creature. "See, we belong up North," he said, but his eyes looked misty.

My chest stilled like a rock.

His hand felt like a mallet pounding my body into the ground.

*

The light is nearly gone now, just a whisper or a dream of twilight lingering in the rearview mirror. We stopped at a rest stop near a river a few miles back. Now we pass a gaudy bar, its Christmas lights shimmering in the autumn darkness like a bad omen. Two bright streetlights add to the sudden mirage of daylight. An old man hunkers over a cane near the bar's doorway, offering his free arm to a woman with coifed white hair. She cuddles close to him, a red sweater covering her shoulders. I can see their love story in a happily ever after: an end-of-life move to a calm northern wilderness, their dessert.

*

The car's mileage continues to tick upward as I cross and uncross my ankles, uncertain how to become comfortable. I feel ungainly. Life is ungainly. I reach out to take his hand in the darkness of the car, feel its warmth. Little red and orange dashboard lights light our entwined knuckles.

“Almost there.”

I rub my eyes, my head, the bridge of my nose. We'll be crossing a concrete-and-steel bridge soon, a passage over troubled water that won't calm my soul. The porch light will be on. The curtains will be drawn. All cars will be tucked away for the night, all shoes lined up before the entry way mat, the television quietly playing the news.

I remember the last conversation I had with them, wet eyes, slammed doors, sore hearts.

We cross the bridge and pull into the driveway. My husband's hand traces my belly. I lace my fingers through with his and imagine the little heart beating beneath the pulse of our wrists.

Telephone Poles

Growing up, 1208 telephone poles separated us. You're from a town with two churches and a stop sign nobody slows down for. Over the hill is a valley with trees and hay and deer. Under a shifting sunrise, the valley turns black and white with cows. You say your family owns the land. I moved between apartment houses stacked on roads with names of numbers: 3rd Street, 6th Avenue, 43rd. Live chickens are akin to warlocks and fairies.

On Christmas Day, we drive down roads with names of letters: County Road A, B, BB. The snow freckles the hood of our car and the baby gurgles in the back seat. Boxes wrapped in tree-patterned paper fill the rearview mirror. One for each year they didn't let you in.

"They probably won't be there," you say, and I wonder why we're going.

I see you in steel-toed boots and worn jeans, a hand-me-down jacket that never fit right over the thick cotton of flannel shirts. The wooden trusses of the barn catch sunbeams through the cracks and your back hunches over some task—with a shovel, a bucket, a wrench. You form an arched gateway with your spine.

Downed trees lean over the road, supported only by the arms of their brothers. A river groans under the weight of ice.

Last summer, we caught a perch in this river. We didn't bring ice or a cooler so we cooked it over a fire in the sand and I told you I felt like Huck Finn, which made you laugh. Your laugh was always gravelly with disuse. Without a place to stay, we slept in a used tent with a hole in the roof that let the stars peek in.

I check on the baby as we pull in the driveway. Bubbles pop from her lips while she sleeps. Tires bounce over gravel and potholes where the road slips deep into the valley. Farm

equipment emerges from under frosted trees. The house slants down, always down, as though it's folding into itself. Only the tractor and a gutted truck sit in the cleared parking area.

"They're not here." Your shoulders hunch for a moment before you square them off. You never talk about the past, shirk questions like they're live wires.

"Should we wait? Maybe..."

A light flickers in an upstairs window. Curtains are drawn closed with a jerk.

You see it, too. In the backseat, the baby lets out a frustrated squeal that I feel compelled to repeat myself. My fingers curl into the car seat.

I know it's not your fault when you say, "Well, that's it, then. Let's go."

I know it's not your fault, but...why did we do this again?

In the trunk we've tucked six presents, two homemade pies, and one Christmas card you wrote yourself. Your knuckles burned white.

I climb over the seat and slip my arms around our tiny daughter. I curve my body over her car seat for comfort. Ten diapers, four onesies, three books, six toys, a diaper bag for everything else. One screaming infant.

1208 telephone poles stand between this house and home and I can feel the sizzling vibration of every one.

Under the Apple Tree

Frannie and I sit under the apple tree, drinking store-bought apple juice in paper cups. I may only be ten, but the irony isn't lost on me.

The grass hasn't been mowed since the divorce; its long blades prickle my bare legs between my cut-offs and ankle socks. Frannie laughs at the birds as they flaunt their wings and sing. Frannie wears a sundress over ratty jeans and bare feet because Frannie wears what she wants. It takes a ferocious energy to fight with Frannie, energy Mom doesn't have.

Mom appears in the kitchen window, washing the lunch dishes. If I stood behind her, I would hear plates and forks clanging together louder than usual. Dad, *you've* gone and wasted your one week of vacation, spent it with your new family in Disneyland, even though the three of us have waited for you all summer.

I wonder what a broken heart sounds like. I bet it makes a *splacking* sound. Not the crunch of lettuce between bread in the ham sandwiches we ate for lunch, or the crisp *crrrrack-plop* of an egg against the frying pan, but the mushy splat of a rotten apple falling from the tree.

Three Weddings in March

We sit in the front row at the second wedding, on pink plastic folding chairs in a park with a sputtering fountain and transplanted cacti.

March melts along like the snowbanks at the edges of parking lots. My first sister marries an ex-con, the other a woman twice her age and me, the handsome Nigerian I met stationed in the Peace Corps.

At the first wedding, we throw rice, which chokes pigeons and seagulls.

At the second, we throw white rose petals dyed the Irish green of Shamrock shakes.

At my own, we will throw nothing, not even a backwards glance. My mind searches future—bodies embracing like candy cane stripes, filling each other's gaps, dreams whispered across breath-warmed pillows. Secrets and plans unwrap and refold but never the same, like trying to rearrange the mannequin in the store window after you've taken the blouse for your own.

This March is cold, but we breathe in the crisp, fresh air until our teeth ache. Every little thought melts in our mouths like sweet rice and grasshopper-flavored rose petals.

Shakespeare is a Poor Alternative for Counseling

Two years into our failing marriage, you suggest we audition for *Hamlet*.

You quote our therapist: “*Try something new together...Reignite the flame.*”

My protests are variations on “We can’t act” and “Tragedies don’t fucking reignite flames”.

My suggestions: gardening under moonlight, the soul-filling melody of blues, watching sunbeams creak through skyscrapers at daybreak.

The theater: torn, maroon curtains and warped, narrow stairs. Auditions: cocktail waiters, a few weary grayhairs, us.

You slip into Hamlet’s robes like you do every lead role. Husband. Boss. Preacher. A natural spoiled brat ruler. *Who would bear the whips and scorns of time..?*

I’m cast as Ophelia.

“Exciting!” you say.

“An omen.” I frown.

Still we join others rehearsing lines by candlelight in sleazy taverns. We all pretend we are sexy because we’ve become actors. Poets. Lovers. “Someday we’ll watch my name in lights, baby.” Your wink.

Sickly stage light on your face, you lean in: “*I never gave you aught.*”

When the final curtain closes, I go home and shred your old love letters. *Like sweet bells jangled out of tune.* Scatter them from the rooftop of our apartment building: a hundred cast-off Yorick skulls.

Homeless in Hawai'i

I find a spot on the beach past the other bums and collapse into dust-colored sand that fades into rocky coral beneath the waves. Moonglow haunts the water. The air smells of salt, mango, and zinc oxide.

A Midwesterner, I don't know the fear of water at night. I don't know jellyfish, sharks, rip-tide; I don't know hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis. What I do know are blizzards—cold that leaks under doors and whistles through cracks you never knew existed until winter's rage. Ice that slicks until tires grasp at only the memory of road. Snowdrifts that claw their way over car hoods as headlights weave like lighters during a slow song.

Only now they wave cell phones.

Only now my body settles into sand warmed by the sun and caressed by the tide. Your home warms my body the way you used to before heaving snowdrifts and weaving headlights took you away.

I knew I'd find you here somehow.

Down here the day's heat penetrates the sand layers deep. Down here the moon stares so long and hard that I want to slap it.

Beaches and Pilgrims

When they place you in my arms, it's difficult to believe you're real: squirmy and damp like a seal. The world shrinks into your smooth butterscotch skin, teeny nose, thick brown hair.

"It's impossible to feel this much," I say. "The world is cruel." But I laugh at your perfect round face, scrunched eyes, possibility.

"Don't tell him that," my husband says, one hand on my shoulder, the other reaching for you, tiny creature, so gentle it's like you're made of glass. His eyes laugh with me, though, and I know it's okay to tell the truth. The three of us: an island, safely floating past earth's concerns.

We carry you home in the crooks of our arms. I press the heart-shaped button on your teddy bear, and it glows indigo and plays a tinkling version of "Frere Jacques." You yawn, chunky doll arms outstretched, and sleep.

*

When I go to my grandfather's grave, I don't know how to think about anything other than the fact that I'd planned to visit him once more but ran out of time.

Brick walls of the nursing home. The emptiness of long hallways. A clock there loudly is ethereal.

Here the gravestones seem to glow beneath arched oak trees. Their bark: dark, warped like the clay pots I used to make in an old thrift store kiln. I still can't shape clay.

I think to go alone, to feel, but I don't. You are here, tucked in a sling on my back.

"We are lightning bugs," I tell you, and you giggle.

*

Sugar maples burn orange-red. When we pluck a leaf from a twig, we are holding bits of sunset in our palms.

Comfort. In the changing landscapes of our life, the ephemerality of our existence, the exposed bricks and crooked staircases of apartments we haunt until our next lease expires.

I hold you on a rocking chair. The front porch sags beneath our weight. Leaves swirl off the nearest oak in a tempest, spiraling toward us, possessed, land at our feet. I count the seconds until the next wind gust.

*

The three of us on the back porch swing. The Greatest Lake babbles below the soles of our feet. If we jump into the sky we can break its crystalline surface. You two watch the lightning bugs while I write about the supralogical, like the way the sunset last night fit my mood perfectly, all maroon- raspberry slush melting into the great bowl of water. His profile catches in the web of my glance, eyes half-lidded, camera lens flick-flick, lips half-parted, we are dreaming of home.

When I see the beach, I see sand and warmth, sunscreen and sunburn.

He sees pearl diving, bringing up the shiny white bits into the light, into larger hands.

You are young. You see home, the only life you remember.

“Together is home,” I say.

Your eyes: lapping up the world, collecting memories in a melting hourglass. You don't yet understand that we are time-travelers and pilgrims, that soon it's time to go.

In Which You Become Invisible

You live in that damned city where the stars blurred out above car exhaust, pollution, and, in winter, the tepid breath of strangers. Today, the air is cold enough to sprinkle frost along the edges of windows up in your twelfth floor apartment. When you touch your hand to the pane, instead of clearing a smudge of frosted glass with your body heat, your hand slips right through. You turn and pace towards and through the bedroom mirror. Reflectionless.

You don't have to call into work because you took that online marketing job, the one your husband said was practical but you thought was a death sentence, sitting at home with a toddler, all the burdens of both a stay-at-home mom and a working woman with none of the benefits. You hover in the doorway of the living room, watch your daughter bounce puppets along the couch's arms.

It doesn't matter to her that you are invisible. She stacks blocks into imaginary cities that mirror the buildings you stroller past each afternoon. She sips juice from a cup and talks gibberish to make-believe friends, her teddy bear, and other imaginary creatures, like you.

When your husband gets home, he throws a tie on the unmade bed and slumps into his armchair. His left hand clenches the TV remote, the other ruffles your daughter's hair. He waits for a dinner that will never arrive. Your invisible hand no longer grasps the pots and pans, sinks into the microwave's buttons.

In Which You Are More Visible than You've Ever Wanted to Be

When you explain to your daughter that she cannot eat the unpurchased ice cream out of the quart with her hands, she collapses into a heap in Wal-Mart's checkout line. Toddler-chubby arms drawn together, over her head, strappado. Her howls echo off the concrete floor, through steel overhead beams, over plastic stalls dividing checkout lanes into prison cells.

Packs of college students, carts loaded with chips and drink mixes, giggle and roll their eyes, shift over to the next line. A middle-aged woman in front of you glances back and shrugs her navy jacket collar a little tighter over the neckline. She adds centimeters of distance between herself and your scene.

Snot bubbles out your daughter's nose and sprays the floor of Wal-Mart, shellacs her hair against her head. "Ice cream!" is barely audible above the choking sobs and heaving, mucus-laden breaths. You check your watch, your phone, the floor—stare aggressively at the sliding doors in case you may have somehow developed the power of teleportation within the last few seconds.

Your daughter is no longer human, it seems. She is animal, mystic, other, creature. Monster. Beast. Yet she is also you. Perhaps her cries will shatter the glass of the frozen foods section, send shards blasting in *Carrie*-like horror. Perhaps her cries will simmer, fizzle, and she'll extend exhausted arms toward your refuge: "Mama."

It is too soon to tell.

You, too, long to throw arms over in surrender, let gravity crumple your mass to the floor, and scream until someone gives you everything you want.

The World Will Never Know

My daughter and I sit in a booth at the corner coffee shop. The right side of her face is lit by the slanting sunlight of January's afternoon, turning her brown hair a burnt copper. She is leaving tomorrow for France—studying abroad, her fourth semester of college.

“Now's really the perfect time,” Marla says again, stirring whipped cream with her pinky finger.

“You're right, you're right.” My voice is a thread above a whisper. My head bobs unconsciously, and I run a hand through my hair. A car passes by the window, its bass thumping loud enough to shake my bones. “It's the right time. You're young and the world is calling.”

Am I a talking brochure? I sprinkle another sugar packet into my coffee, use a stir stick to sweep up the beads from the bottom.

*

During my own time abroad, my second Friday in Scotland, I arrived at a nightclub with an inflatable bouncy castle at the back. The Canadians, Scots, and Norwegians shared my passion for poetry and hard liquor. We bought shots of tequila from a bartender in a clown costume and bounced until the neon lights swirled a technicolor tornado. Someone pointed out that the building was an old church—they recognized the curve of baroque arches—and that the bar was situated atop the tabernacle. I drank shots to this and laughed until tears streamed down my face and a man waving a bottle of champagne asked me to dance.

*

Marla licks whipped cream off the top of her lip. She is so untouched by everything. The baby superimposed over her now: a pink and blue striped knit cap atop her tiny bare head.

I dig the new phone in its shiny packaging out of my messenger bag, the bag that doubles as the keeper of my secrets. “It’s a universal phone.” I hand it to her. “They said it works in any country, so you can call whenever you need to.” I try to say it casually, but I have to blink my eyes a few times and look down into my coffee. I long to tell her about Scotland but cannot; she knows I don’t want her to go abroad, believes I will find any excuse to keep her here. Outside, I stutter for a second, sip coffee. Inside, I hope she never knows the fear that lurks in the back of my heart, the fear that creeps around all women in dim alleys, in gloomy bars.

“Thanks,” Marla says. “I will call, you know. Not all the time, but I will.” She slips the phone into her leather purse, tucked against her side. She looks ready to bolt, her body charged with excitement. Her eyes watch the clock behind the counter.

*

I never got his name.

We shared a dance and the bottle of champagne. His accent changed, switching cadence and rhythm until I could no longer tell if it was him or the alcohol. My face flushed under his intense, dark gaze. I’d thrown back tequila and jumped in a tabernacle bouncy castle. Life was rich with possibilities. He walked me to the bus stop. Then past it.

“Where are we going?” My tongue slurred thick in my mouth, my head loose on my neck.

“It doesn’t matter.”

*

The espresso machine wails behind me. Marla purses her lips as she takes a sip of her drink, taps her foot against the leg of the chair. She’s the sort of person who refuses to order something normal off the menu board but uses her smiles and laughs to convince the barista to whip up

some new invention. Caramel coats her upper lip in a thin bead until her tongue dashes out, laps it up.

“Marla,” I say. “I studied abroad, too.”

She tips her chin the way she used to when she was a teenager, that sarcastic lilt on the tip of her tongue. “You never mentioned that.”

I reach for the journal in my bag, my memento from my time in Scotland. My hand brushes its worn leather cover. The keeper of my secrets.

“I guess it’s time to go.” I remember my own eagerness to travel abroad, that fateful arrival in Scotland, my heels bouncing on the airport’s moving walkway, willing it to take me faster to my future, my time, my adventure. My own mother tugging at her hair, wiping her nose inconspicuously, as I stride into the terminal with one careless wave over my shoulder.

*

His hand was rough when he dragged me down the sidewalk, his voice no longer disguised. I stumbled once, twice, until he sighed and waited for me to take my shoes off, one-handed, tripping down the foreign street. Heartbeats filled my head. I imagined my blood pouring into my brain matter until it was saturated in red.

Somehow I dug my brain out from its dampened state, clawing my way into focus, memorizing the names of streets he led me down. I contemplated tearing my bracelet, dropping a trail of beaded breadcrumbs for police to follow later. I saw my body at the shore of the North Sea, heard my mother’s sobs, my father’s roar of outrage.

I treaded water under four shots of tequila and half a bottle of champagne. Words seemed weak, body flimsy, time more fluid than usual. My memory painted images like still shots in time:

His nails piercing my wrist.

A car backfiring.

His body turning in surprise.

My heart racing.

Stilettos in hand.

Their pointed heels pounding his face.

Arms pumping like the wind, bare feet over cobblestone.

The still shots recoiled back into motion, pressing play after fast-forward.

I was back in my Scottish apartment, hands fumbling with door locks, throat dry, head still fluid with alcohol. My roommates were in bed, a ticking clock the only sound. I felt my breathing slow and think, *the world will never know*.

*

When Marla enters the line at security, I thrust the journal at her.

Her eyes widen and blink. One hand reaches for the journal, pauses. “What’s this?” Her free hand loads lip gloss, purse, and laptop into a gray, plastic bin.

“My journal, from when I studied abroad.”

My ears fill with the hum of airport chatter and footsteps on tile.

Marla’s hand closes over leather. She places the journal atop her belongings, slides the container towards the buzzing x-ray machine.

She steps through the metal detector.

“Be safe! Stay with friends! Don’t go anywhere alone!”

I imagine I can see Marla’s eyes roll through the back of her head.

Inside my head: *Don’t drink too much, don’t let a man hurt you, kick his fucking face!*

I do not shout these things at airport security. It doesn't matter what her mother says, but maybe she will listen to the harried words of another young woman, searching for her place in the world.

Marla will write her own story; I trust her narration. She is hurrying headfirst into her future the way I did at this same airport twenty-five years ago.

Marla turns. She blows me a kiss.



Sunny Hills Women's Health and Birthing Center

“Where sunshine and loving care create a magical experience.”

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability to assist our staff with your (underline one) pre-natal and birth class / regular monthly check-up / labor and delivery.

1. How far along are you?

About 2 months...9 weeks? Dr. Jones counts weeks, and the baby books count months, but if you divide nine weeks into two months, it does not divide evenly. What's the deal?

2. What is your current level of discomfort?

Pretty amazing considering I'm literally building an actual human being the way some people build lego creations.



Makes those fools look like slackers. I got #madskills.

3. Question of the Day! Describe your personal family dynamics and birth order growing up.

Is this vital to my health care? Do siblings count if you've only heard rumors of their existence? There's a miniature human playing the accordion with my lower intestine right now, so we'll keep this short. I guess I'm a middle child because people always forgot about me. Like the time my mom left me at the Denny's because she had an important "work" meeting that evening and she knew I could eat fries for hours as long as I had a chocolate shake to dip them in. By 3am it was only a couple truckers lurching over coffee cups and one waitress who shook her head at me every few moments as if I was a hallucination she could clear away. She probably gave herself a migraine, like when you do too many jumping jacks and you feel your brain matter squishing against your skull.

4. Describe your plans following the birth of your child.

I will probably just do the same as always except while holding a baby. When I suggested this to Dr. Jones at my last appointment, she shot snot out of her nose and onto her stethoscope, which was pretty gross. I hope she sanitized that thing.

It would also be nice to, like, have a beer or something.

5. Describe any changes in mood or behavior. (Complete separate 85-question Depression Screening attached.)

Everything is honkey-dory.



Sunny Hills Women's Health and Birthing Center

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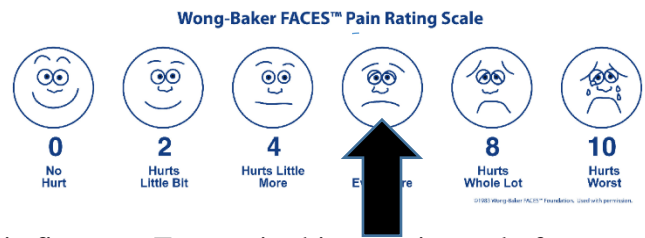
Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability to assist our staff with your (underline one) pre-natal and birth class / regular monthly check-up / labor and delivery.

1. How far along are you?

35 weeks.

2. What is your current level of discomfort?

Do you know how it feels to have heart burn for 25 straight days? Kinda like that scene in Indiana Jones where the



guy is eaten alive by an army of pyromanic fire ants. Except, in this case, instead of dissolving into dust and bones in seconds, he screams for 25 days straight.

Also, the baby is using my bladder as a trampoline. Don't picture those suburban trampolines with protective nets around them —this baby is a freaking Olympian.

Also, I get leg cramps to the point where I seriously wonder if my calve muscles will ever unclench their death grip. I may curdle into a massive ball of frayed fissures and spazaming muscle tissue and and then die.

Other than that, though, no complaints! ☺

3. Question of the Day! What your expectations for your child's future?

Wait, is this for those pushy moms who, like, want to map out their child's entire existence, from diapers to Dartmouth? This is a funny question.

4. Describe your plans following the birth of your child.

I bought all the baby stuff: that's a go on clothing, crib, diapers, and general transportation needs. I also bought, like, twenty baby books, so I think we're good.

5. Describe any changes in mood or behavior. (Complete separate 85-question Depression Screening attached.)

Let's see...I have to interrupt perfectly respectable conversations with friends and co-workers to pee ten times an hour. I think you should applaud my positivity considering the face I indicated on the pain chart is grimacing.



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1. How far along are you?

IN LABOR! Do I seriously have time to fill out this form? Babies are literally about to shoot out of my body. Let's get MOVING, people!

2. What is your current level of discomfort?

Remember when the world exploded into a million glass shards and humanity landed in a bleeding cesspool of pain? No? Just me then?



3. Question of the Day! Describe your ideal life post-partum.

We hook up EVERYBODY to one of those machines where they can feel the pain of actual labor while I stand there, laughing, propping the baby against my hip. I have a caramel macchiato in one hand and sushi in the other. And I'm smoking.

4. Describe your plans following the birth of your child.

See question 3, morons.

5. Describe any changes in mood or behavior. (Complete separate 85-question Depression Screening attached.)



This is a picture of me blowing up the world with my mind because my contractions are twenty seconds apart and you're making me fill out this form before taking me to the delivery room.



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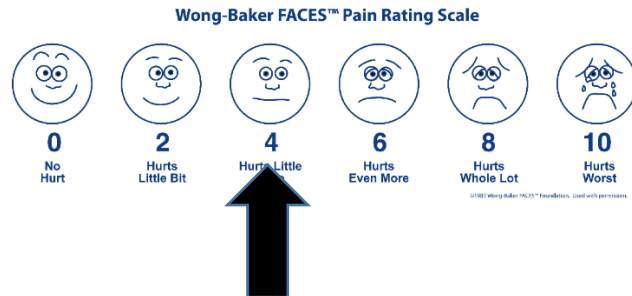
Please complete this follow-up survey regarding our staff's ability to meet your needs during your labor and delivery experience.

1. How would you rate your labor and delivery experience, on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the worst possible experience and 10 being superior service.

"Superior service"? Ah, yeah, maybe change the oil next time you're down there? Other than that, everything went according to plan. I arrived without a baby and I'm leaving with one, so I guess that met all of my expectations. Solid 7.5.

2. What is your current level of discomfort?

Is breastfeeding really supposed to hurt? Because I was under the impression we were supposed to be done with the whole pain thing by now.



3. Please list any of your current questions and concerns regarding your newborn's care.

Oh, man, I think I need an extra sheet. You didn't give me enough space.

4. Please state any other comments not addressed above.

For the love of God get rid of that 85-question Depression Screening! If patients are not already depressed from dealing with the discomfort of having their bodies infiltrated by a squirming creature for nine months, or placing their aching backs into these ridiculous plastic waiting room chairs, answering 85 shitty versions of the same question will drive them straight to the depths of despair. Also, you've gotta ditch the elevator music in the delivery room. Please crank some peppy celtic rock or maybe ska covers of 80's pop

songs. I think I speak for every women alive when I say the last thing I want to hear when I'm pushing a baby out my vagina is an instrumental version of "Your Body is a Wonderland".

5. Describe any changes in mood or behavior. (Complete separate 85-question Depression Screening attached.)

You have got to be fucking kidding me.

Moon Shadows

When Selene is born, the two of us return to my one-bedroom apartment. Eight floors up, the western walls slant, shirking from eastern ocean.

Being alone in a familiar place is relaxing—the same smells: salt air, lavender candles, the coffee beans I could never give up.

Well, no longer alone, really.

Since Selene's ultrasound, I feel a certain strength. Two strong women, alone but together. I grew up on Lorelai and Rory. I anticipated movie nights with throw pillows, fights we'd soon forget, bucket-loads of coffee at diners that faced the park.

I didn't anticipate the night-talking.

The first days at home with Selene are a melting blur of Dali's clocks –day and night swim together. Selene's needs: my life.

The third week, I rise from a pile of teensy diapers and burp cloths to hear Selene talking. I page through baby books and mommy blogs for answers but return empty-handed.

The talking occurs only at night: the thinnest whisper of sound ekes out the crib across from my bed. Moonlight blooms across the floor and jumps with the shadows of swirling storm clouds. As the hum of word-like babble issues from the crib, I slip into another dimension. No longer clear: the line between reality and fiction. Nerves tingle from my curling toes to my scalp. I will my heart to beat more quietly, strain my ears to hear: a murmur, a sigh, a hum.

The humming whirs into something semi-audible. Perhaps a series of numbers and letters reminiscent of algorithms. Perhaps a long-lost language. Perhaps I am going insane.

I hold my breath. Slip from my comforter, tiptoe to the crib. A worn floorboard croaks at my approach, and the whispering dies. The air is thick, tangible. I peer between the worn rails of the crib.

Selene lies there, eyes closed, her face a portrait of peace. The roving moonlight strokes one cheek and paints it silver. Air whips into and out of her lungs at a hummingbird's rate. Doctors assure me she is supposed to breathe this fast, but it seems unnatural.

I slide under my quilt and count back from ten; darkness takes me before I reach six.

The humming repeats every night for two weeks. When I approach my daughter's crib, she is the baby of Impressionist paintings: arms tucked under her chin, all smooth lines and gentle oil, movement of color and shadow.

Our days are freckled like those paintings, bits that blend together: eating, reading, singing, sleeping, diapering, soothing, pacing. The day's subtle movements slow my brain to a logical pace. I make the vital calculations I never did before.

The last nine months at my housekeeping job, I scrubbed floors and folded towels, preparing for my life to change. Of course. A baby. But still, something more. Something enough to make me say no when Eleanor asked if I wanted her to hold my position. I knew then I would not be returning, but why? My co-workers: quiet. The pay: good for an art-school dropout; we kept the tips off our tax forms.

Cleaning bathtubs and tucking sheet corners into perfect folds, I missed that Selena's pregnancy took eleven months, if going by the last night with my ex.

If not, where did she come from?

I remember, after the break-up: insomniac, wrapped in my Grandmother's quilt on the window seat, staring at the ocean, its shimmering surface under the full moon. Beyond the other

buildings that line the bay, the moon seemed to grow and speak, whispering ancient truths in Greek or Latin. In dreams, I walk on waves that caress the rocks into sand.

On the last night, I hear it again: a hum that fades into that same ancient language I heard months before her birth. I slink from covers to her crib. Selena's eyes open and glow cerulean as ocean waves. She floats to the window, gestures past her at the moonlight. Her words glimmer like the moon goddess she is. *Veni, Mama.* We step out into the stars.

Wear Your Heart

My son and I discover the library's magical drinking fountain at 6 pm on a Tuesday. Maybe I should say I discover it, because he is too focused on pushing Thomas the Train around the wooden tracks with one pudgy toddler finger. And, okay, the fountain is not a real fountain; it's the plastic spigot of a toy sink.

The cold gray plastic feels dull to the touch, lifeless, and I jump back an inch when the cold liquid oozes out, just a few drops of water, nothing too noticeable. My son doesn't even turn. We're the only ones in the library at this point, we outlasted the afternoon rush of mothers desperate to fix proper dinners and wash cloth diapers who left punctually at 5:30.

"Look, honey," I point to the water now impossibly filling my hand from the plastic gray nozzle. I lift the playset off the floor; the toy weighs about ten pounds but hides no pipe or water source. The door to the mini fridge opens, tumbling out red-brown chunks of plastic, shaped into apples, breads, and meats.

My son is unamused. He smiles, coos, "Choo choo!" and pulls Thomas into the wooden station. He plucks two other cars from the table, one named Percy and that other green one, and he pushes their magnetic backs together, moves them along the track.

*

I was laid off from my first teaching job at seven months pregnant because I taught the students to think.

"Discussions and debates have no place in a world of checkmarks and boxes," they told me, passing the pink slip across the conference table.

"What is the point of this? What do you want the world to become?" My questions veered philosophical; I cemented my thoughts in images of doctor's bills and a small human

growing inside me. I wanted everything: the dream job and my son and the world to understand. I floundered for the words that would keep me employed. “I will teach to the test.”

“It is too late. We know your true intentions now.”

My shoulders hunched around my body the way they did when my mother caught me sneaking Oreos in church decades ago. “Who are we,” I asked, “if not teachers?”

“We are not teachers.” They exchanged a look. “We are the bosses of teachers.” Their faces downturned, mouths in a slight grimace. They showed slight concern, for my sake. Perhaps they truly felt it; perhaps it was for show. “We regret that we have to make these choices. We have to let you go.”

I packed the flowered Thirty-One bag my best friend gave me, I tucked students’ art into file folders and carried them to my car.

*

A small child, hardly older than my son, enters the library’s playroom, unaccompanied by an adult. I get used to things like that in this tiny Midwest town. She points aggressively at the water bottle I have poised beneath the plastic toy spigot. I’m not sure I understand the magic of this fountain yet, but as the words “raspberry lemonade” cross my mind, a tart berry goodness shoots into my water bottle, and my eyebrows shoot into my spirally hairline.

There is nothing connected to the back of the kitchen playset, no magical plumbing that I can see.

*

I left books behind in the classroom. Words on young eyes were worth more than five or ten bucks. I left that metal stapler I stole from the teacher’s lounge after that substitute stole my blue one with the green polka-dots and I felt like that guy from *Office Space* asking everyone

about the damned thing. I left the overhead projector and two movie versions of *The Great Gatsby*, the one that was there for twenty years and the one I bought that the students actually liked.

I stood in the doorway and pretended the meeting hadn't felt like a knuckle-punch to my soul. I pretended I could find another job in three months with a baby due in two. I could have it all.

*

"I've only ever wanted Cherry Cola," the little girl says. Her pigtails bounce around on her head as she pushes me aside in that unconscious way of young children and bends over the fountain herself. Dark fizzy liquid slips into her mouth. She slurps and gulps loudly. Finally, she wipes the sleeve of her checkered green dress, already printed with dirt and grass stains, across her lips. "It seems greedy to ask for more."

I chug from my water bottle and pause. "With that logic, isn't it greedy to ask a water fountain for Cherry Cola? Its only responsibility is water."

Pigtails shakes her tiny head. "I don't want to mess with its magic. If it wants to give me Cherry Cola, I'll take it."

I sip my lemonade and consider her words. My son yells, "Chuga-chuga!" and bounces up and down on his toes, giggling at the girl as she stomps out of the room, apparently on some other reconnaissance mission.

*

On my last trip out of the school building, arms heavy, I ran into Jimmy. Technically, Jimmy ran into me. Jimmy was always running into everybody, his arms flailing around on either side of his

bright red backpack, a reddish bolt of hair sticking straight out from the top of his head, always looking as surprised as his eyes do.

“I heard this cool song on the bus this morning and I thought maybe other kids would judge me if I said I liked it so I decided not to say anything but it was kinda weird and I moved my arms a bit what do you think I should do?”

I paused to adjust the weight of the two boxes piled atop each other in my arms. I wrapped my neurons around Jimmy’s lack of sentence structure. “Well, what did you really want to do, Jimmy?” I asked.

Jimmy shrugged, his backpack bobbing around his arms. He tipped his head slightly to the left. “Well, I guess I wanted to dance.”

“Then,” I said, “dance.”

*

Ten minutes later, I’m at the fountain, greedier than I’ve ever been. If teaching jobs are fiction, maybe magic is real. Maybe a water fountain is the gateway to secrets and dream jobs and multitasking and life. A maroon ribbon of Cherry Cola; a piping slug of chicken broth; an icy blackberry cooler; a smooth, creamy milkshake. As soon as I conjure the image in my mind, the liquid oozes from the fountain. I guzzle like a thief siphoning a car’s gas tank, I slurp like a sloppy newborn calf, I chug until my intestines twist like finger traps. My son turns to me, alarmed, one fist cradling a red train high above his head; the other raised in a questioning half-shrug. I dare Pigtales to return and witness my frenzy.

The Toddlers

The toddlers sit in the coffee shop, their legs dangling a foot past the edges of metal chairs. Tiny loafers brush along the tops of briefcases tucked carefully under the tables. They cradle ceramic mugs too large for their hands and exchange recipes for homemade granola. They talk about self-driving cars careening off cliffs while supermodels down tequila behind the wheel. They talk about manned missions to Mars and the failure of Biosphere 2.

Outside, snowflakes as big as their heads fall from the sky and splatter the cracked sidewalks like the gods are throwing snowballs. The toddlers sip skinny lattes and tap scones against saucers to catch the crumbs. They mourn hometowns lost to natural disasters and the years when adults had to cancel the Olympics. We arrive, smelling of day-old beer and cold cream, but they don't want to get in our car.

Reverse

My sister and I saw a tree fall in reverse at the creek behind our grandparents' house. We were poking at frogs by the rocky water's edge, when the elm lifted its branches out of the streambed, stretched, stretched, uncoiling its brown-gray body. The tree creaked like haunted-house stairs until it stood before us, mountainous.

We still don't speak of this.

After my son is born, I begin to suspect the apartment is haunted. Disembodied voices pull at me through walls when I peer into his crib at night. The refrigerator's light flickers, dies, then burns to vivid life, an electric phoenix. Water fills up the sink and drips out the tub, poured, drained by invisible hands.

I see Her again. She looks like our mother but dimmer, like when you stare through morning fog toward a shadow that may be a cow, or the tractor, or nothing at all. At the kitchen table, she counts on witch-bone fingers while I rock the baby in the living room. When I call my sister, the line is dead.

Outside, our neighbor plows mud into piles at the edge of the yard, his rusted pick-up truck revving and whining through puddles of melted snow. Through cracks in the blinds, I see the truck smooth last remnants of sand-coated snowbanks, debris shoved clear of the road months ago. Damp earth oozes through the grooves in tires, sinks back into its porous home.

TINY'S JAZZ MAGIC

Novella-in-Flash

Jazz music poured through the steel beams of the tenement building, right into its soul. The speakeasy ruled not only the basement, but all of night, all of Storyville. The strain of sax dragged Tiny and me out of bed, down scarred plank stairs, past dewdroppers passing out blue books and women with slits parting dresses past the thigh. *Stick a jazz band on my hearse wagon/Raise hell as I stroll along...*

In the street, we watched the music notes form in the damp air until they were tangible. *So sweet, so cool, so fair...* They twinkled like frozen galaxies trapped in glass, like Lulu White's jewels. Tiny reached her hand to touch them like stars; they reverberated through her thin dress and smooth bronze skin. The breeze swept us up into the trumpet's dance, and we spun past the elegant mansions of Basin Street and over the stone tombs of Lafayette. We floated over land, through time: *melody haunts my reverie...* We took up all of space until we owned night (*a paradise where roses bloom*), and day bowed down its wilted petals.

Far From Storyville

Music replaced the blood in Tiny's veins at birth. I let her listen to the band warm up in the speakeasy downstairs, let her close her eyes and tip her head that way (mmm, mmm, mmm), bask in rich bass. Tap, tap: her foot on the wood floor by the stage where musicians lean into their instruments. Her lips mouth words to songs she shouldn't know at her age as I slip crates of hooch down the cement steps in back. Only so deep you can dig in this city before you hit water.

Tiny slips music notes into pockets of her patchwork dress. She'll slide them out one at a time, savor sound like candy. Music carries her to storybook places far from Storyville, away from her momma: smuggling foot juice with men, wooden crates in my arms and a shiv in my bodice. Barrels rolling down cement steps under fog-humid swamp air, macs flashing pieces tucked in vests, saying, "Hey baby, when your real shift start?"

Tiny and Me

Tiny writes me into her daydreams as a jazz singer, music rolling off my tongue, soft as moonbeams. Fringed skirt, fringed hair. Drop waist, high heels. Tiny paints a beaded tiara on my head and a microphone before my lips.

“Can you see it, Momma?” She squeezes my hands as we sit up in our attic room. Louisiana humidity dampens our skin, dampens two or three clean dresses hanging on a peg. We sit on two wooden chairs tucked under the table, the only furniture in the room besides our mattresses and some other woman’s leftover bureau.

“I see it, Tiny.” And I do. For a moment. Squint past this humble room, this litter, this brothel, this place we call home, and see: Hope. See: Music. In the dream, my voice doesn’t warble like it did when my own momma used to make me sing hymns on Sundays. My voice is clear, warmed honey coating lemons. Rhythm. Heels tap-tap-tap. Passion. Arms caress microphone stand. Poise.

My fingers tremble for a moment, but I squeeze Tiny’s hand, let her know I cherish her gift of escape.

Lena's Last Customer

Tiny plays outside when I have customers. It's safer that way. Maybe. No place safe in Storyville, least of all a pro skirt's bedroom. *We'll take a boat to the land of dreams...New Orleans...*

This one's rough, sandpaper on flesh, nails like daggers, words like burning stakes. Hands that claw from a life of take, take, take.

When Tiny finds me afterward, I'm holding a damp cloth to my cheek to stop the bleeding. *...Heaven on earth, they call it Basin Street...*

"You let a man do that to you?" Her black eyes never leave my face, those pools of knowledge, the question just for show. How can I tell her that men own this building, city, country, history? *Won't you come and go with me/Down that Mississippi?*

"Life ain't free, Tiny. I paid my way working five years before you came along." I bite my lips so hard blood pools in the crevices of my teeth.

Tiny's eyes call bullshit. She's stashed six year's of venom in her bones, sick of the way we play this game. Now her eyes press like fingers in my skin, and I see she knows the world. Men may write the rules, her eyes say, but, those eyes say, *but*: we are jazz, the music, the smooth shuffle and sigh of bodies and night, the magic. The power. Life. Future.

Frannie

Sometimes when I slip hooch into the speakeasy, Frannie keeps an eye on Tiny. Frannie, who's still got her name in the blue book because she don't have a kid. Frannie, threading her hands through her copper hair and spreading her lips with her tongue. *There's danger lurking in/ Them there eyes...*

Frannie, who has the only white skin I've ever wanted on mine. Frannie, who claimed she was a midwife in another life, scarf draped over her curls, kneeling at the foot of the mattress when I gave birth to Tiny because I couldn't do what the other women did and take herbs that bled your body dry or send myself tumbling down narrow staircases. Pimps in dark alleys selling magic pills for a dollar. Because Tiny held onto me like the moss on tombstones, the pulse of her heart butterflying underneath my palm, I kept her.

Frannie, who, six years ago, promised to keep Tiny a secret. We soon learned nobody cared. Other babies run wild through the red light, other mommas got nothing to lose. *There's danger lurkin in / Them there eyes...*

Frannie, my protector in Storyville, where your protection one minute is your pimp is your drug is your death the next. Frannie stays solid as a stone, dependable as sweat in the small of your back on these New Orleans' nights.

Lena's First Customer

There's a darkness that haunts this city underneath its gloss and glitter, like the bottom of a train engine obscured by rhythm and smoke. But I have nowhere else to go.

In the backwaters of Mississippi hope leaks out of pores and oozes into mud. Mama tells me I gotta leave. Daddy tells me don't come back. Two days past houses of people we know or people who look like me until I'm in New Orleans. I meet a woman named Frannie who says she had a dream about me, and I don't know what to make of voodoo magic like that, but I follow her past mansions and down cobbled roads. She asks me what I got.

She tilts copper curls my way as I say I got nothing.

"Not even hope?" Her green eyes glow like alligators' in moonlight.

I let my eyes meet hers for a beat. Two, three, four.

When we stand in front of the brothel's shiny wooden doors, I feel that Frannie's led me to the alligator's jaw, but those eyes are knowing, and somehow, kind. Maybe she, too, knows the dark of dirt road leading to tin-can shack, of moonbeam over empty bayou.

She blinks, then smiles. "We got hope in barrels down in Storyville, long as you've got nothing to lose."

Why We Movin' to Chicago?

Everything we own fits in my carpetbag, same as when I came to this city, newly orphaned and looking for change. Change brought me mean hands and a child, but I kept a ceiling, four walls, and steady meals for eleven years. Wager most women here don't last five, much less with a baby.

Frannie's the only one I'm going to miss when we go to Chicago. Not Little Jim or Moonshine, who let me sneak crates of hooch from the dock to the speakeasy for cash instead of telling Big Boss I'm not pulling my weight nights. Tiny says she can take out Little Jim and Moonshine with her jazz magic wink's quick.

"Hold your tongue on that applesauce, Tiny." Sometimes I think a six-year-old will get you killed faster than any mac's gun here in Storyville.

"I can do it!" Tiny says, and I slap her so fast the hurt sticks to both our skin.

Tiny Looks out the Window of the Northbound Train

The train don't hum like any saxophone, but there's a melody to steel on steel, a rhythm to my mother's pulse as she finally breathes open air for the first time in eleven years. There's a rhyme to a fresh start in a city of wind, to the breeze of trumpet notes swirling up a river and scraping open train car windows. There's a bass thumping along these empty prairie grasses, notes that scale stormy clouds and hover like smokestack fog.

The tracks jostle, but Momma and I hold steady to the movement of jazz, to the movement of life.