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Between Beats

Alexander Belz
Northern Michigan University

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BETWEEN BEATS

By

Alexander Belz

THESIS

Masters of English

Graduate Studies Office

2012

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Alexander Belz is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

Committee Chair: Dr. Paul Lehmborg

Date:

First Reader: Professor Jennifer Howard

Date:

Department Head: Dr. Raymond Ventre

Date:

Assistant Provost of Graduate Education
and Research: Dr. Brian Cherry

Date:

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NAME:

Belz, Alexander Nathan

DATE OF BIRTH:

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ABSTRACT
BETWEEN BEATS

BY

Alexander Belz

The creative nonfiction work contained herein illustrates a problem the author has faced in his life: how, after a personal tragedy like invasive heart surgery and a pacemaker installation, a person can begin to heal – both physically and emotionally. It also speaks to a larger problem of the human experience, not just addressing the question of the meaning of all life, but also asking the question of what is the meaning of one specific life? This question is addressed through the author’s own struggles to find meaning in his existence and create significant connections with people he cares about deeply in his life.

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DEDICATION

To my mother, who always acted with her heart before she thought it through and who taught me to do the same. And to my father, who always believed in me and my writing, even when I didn't.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the English Department faculty, who have guided me all these years through both my undergraduate and graduate work. Thanks must also go to Professor Paul Lehmborg, my thesis director, who has helped me tremendously throughout the process of writing this thesis and Professor Jennifer Howard, my thesis reader, for her help and for never minding me popping into her office for a random question.

I would also like to thank Olga for her help in reminiscing and providing me information regarding her side of the story (even if this thesis is perhaps necessarily biased toward my own viewpoint.) And Tara, for believing in my writing, encouraging me these last several months and teaching me that sometimes, when you're freaking out, you just have to pause and walk like a robot for a while. And thanks to my father, for always giving me the inspiration to tell a good story.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Part 1, Section I.....	2
Part 1, Section II.....	4
Part 1, Section III.....	10
Part 1, Section IV.....	23
Part 1, Section V.....	35
Part 2, Section 1.....	40
Part 2, Section II.....	41
Part 2, Section III.....	47
Part 2, Section IV.....	49
Part 2, Section V.....	52
Part 2, Section VI.....	53
Part 2, Section VII.....	57
Part 2, Section VIII.....	59

INTRODUCTION

There's a procedure in cardiology called electromagnetic ablation. When I was nineteen, this procedure was done on me – they cut small holes in the veins near my groin and slid wires inside until they reached my heart. Once there, they shot electricity at my heart, in an effort to burn off the radical cells that had taken refuge there to make my heart malfunction. This thesis is my attempt at a writing equivalent of blasting lightning at my heart; an electromagnetic storm of scattered thought and memory; a small testament to some of the people I have known and loved.

It is about absence, about hearts, about love and life and meaning. About loss.

I don't know how to deal with loss – loss of self, loss of people (through death or absence,) loss of anything, really. I cannot provide you with answers on the meaning of absence, the weight of a broken heart, the answers to life – I don't have those.

This is my attempt at a therapeutic ablation of my own. My intention is to burn away all the leftover, scattered thoughts from what I've been through, both medically and psychologically, into what is hopefully, if nothing else, a good story. And what is life but a collection of stories?

PART 1

I

I was sitting at a bar in Marquette, Michigan on a Tuesday night at 11 p.m., across a table from a beautiful, intelligent girl. It was too early to tell, but I was pretty sure if perfection existed in this world, it might be embodied in the woman in front of me.

I was 24, attending graduate school at Northern Michigan University to obtain my masters in English. I was also teaching freshman English at the university.

“But you take classes, too, right? I mean, beyond teaching? You’re a student, too?” she asked me politely, holding her KBC Widowmaker up to her face like a microphone. I couldn’t tell if her eyes were blue or green. Every time I looked at them, they seemed to be a different color. Even her eyes were undefined and exciting. My heart started to beat a little funny.

“Yeah,” I said. This was a confusing point to explain. I was in that nether world of teacher and student, a walking contradiction.

I continued, “I’m taking a class which teaches me how to teach. I’m also taking thesis credits.”

“Thesis?” she inquired politely. It wasn’t exactly a question, so I didn’t answer. My thesis was about my heart and my pacemaker – the story of my thesis was the story of my life – it was the story of what happened before and after I was given a second chance in this world. It was the story of my heart – physically broken, repaired by a machine, like a terrible Arnold Swarzenagger movie of the 80s.

I changed the subject. I was 24 years old and a smoker – and I have a pacemaker. It was too hard to explain to a beautiful girl on a first date that my heart doesn’t function

the way normal hearts do. I couldn't take the reaction – casual acceptance, immediate concern, a swapping of stories about someone she knows three times my age with a pacemaker. Every possibility just reminded me of the sadness and seeming impossibility of having a machine to regulate my heartbeats.

If I was going to discuss it, I didn't want it to slip out casually when I was half-buzzed at a bar. Talking about my heart was like taking off my clothes.

Later, we were sitting in her car outside my apartment around midnight. We were laughing, looking at each other, giggling in the night. My heart was beating. My hand near her hand. Her heart was beating. We were alive. This moment was eternal.

But absence – that was what I feared. To get close, to know this woman, to forever make her a part of my growing story of pages and pages – where did this path end?

In the body, blood flows through veins and arteries, to be cleaned and de-oxygenated in cardiac temples. Our blood is ever moving, forever being dirtied and cleaned and pushed out and pulled in from every part of our bodies. Our ventricles and our atria, somewhere deep in our rib cage, sing a deep, forever drumming song of existence.

I wondered if mine sounded different. I wondered if it sounded mechanical, robotic, Auto-Tuned into the right pitch and beat.

But I heard none of my heart's beating song – I felt only alive, in a car outside of my apartment complex, with a beautiful woman and bated breath, my heart singing a song I cannot hear.

II

When I was fourteen, five years before I got the pacemaker, I was seeing a girl for a little while. Her name was Jenny. She was two years older than me. Her hair was dark and red, her skin freckle-covered and pale.

One day, in the hallways of high school, I was leaning against a wall and she was leaning against me, her head on my chest. She'd smoked recently, during lunch. The stale smell of it contrasted with the evergreen of her mints.

Weeks later someone would tell me she cheated on me with a boy during a school play, a small handjob infraction that resulted in our end. I didn't wait to find out if it was true (it wasn't). I'd leave her for a mousy brunette who loved libraries and making out.

Our end was near and we had just started – but we were not conscious of this fact.

Because in that hallway, we were all that mattered – we were eternal, no beginning and no end, just a guy and a girl. Her head on my chest, the smell of smoke and evergreen, her hand in mine and her thumb rubbing circles in the skin between my thumb and forefinger.

But she paused. She paused – and that's what this story is about. She looked up at me, worried.

“Is everything okay?” she asked me.

“Yeah,” I said, “it's great, why do you ask?”

She put her freckle-covered palm on my chest, laid it flat over my sternum.

“I don’t think your heart is...oh, wait, there it goes. Sorry. It just seemed like your heart had stopped.”

“It stopped?”

“It seemed like it. Wait,” she kept her hand on my sternum and put her ear to my chest like she was listening for something.

“Here,” she said. She pulled my hand to the spot on my chest where hers had been. “And here,” Then she put my other hand on *her* chest, right over her left breast. Was I supposed to squeeze it? Or have my fingers lay limp? Or keep my hand there like it wasn’t her breast at all but some other body part, like an elbow or a hand or a foot?

“Do you feel it?” she asked, and I want to say, of course I feel it! This was a breast, a boob, a tit, in my hand!

“Feel...” I started. I wanted to ask what.

“Your heart, my heart. Do you feel the difference?”

I closed my eyes and concentrated. And the only thing that came to mind was *squishy*. I mean, really, it was only the bottom part of my palm and my thumb on her breast, but I was certain it was squishy like a sponge, or a water balloon, or a...breast. This was a breast, dammit!

I exhaled. I tried to concentrate again. I felt our two pulses – it was the first time I’d ever compared mine to another.

Mine was irregular. It jumped. Sped up and slowed down without warning. Hers was constant, steady, full of healthy-sounding thump-bumps. Hers was a metronome and mine was some terrible kid trying to learn to keep a beat on the drums and failing.

After a minute, mine fell into step with hers. Then there were thumps. She smiled at me.

But the whole time, the only thing I was aware of – the only thing I was concerned about – was the fact that my hand was on her breast.

She smiled at me, pulled my hands away from our chests and threw her arms around my neck. She kissed me, all mints and cigarettes and squishy parts against my chest, where my heart flopped around like a fish that suddenly became aware it was out of water.

After Jenny, I should have been concerned. I should have known that a heart is not built to stop.

After Jenny, I had my own personal superstition about my heart – when I sensed it beating funny, that was my heart and my body telling me something. Something good or something bad. I thought for minutes and hours sometimes after it beat funny about what exactly my heart was trying to tell me.

That's the phrase I always used in my head: "beat funny." I didn't know how else to describe it. Sometimes it felt like bubbles rubbing against my skin in the place where my heart resides, only inside, rather than out. Sometimes it felt like sinking – like falling forward, only my legs were firmly planted and my ankles weren't bent.

In high school, it beat funny all the time. I always assumed it was romance related. After all, it stands to reason (or so the 13- and 14-year-old version of me thought) that if a heart beats funny, it must be because of love.

So I followed my funny-beating heart into many different situations like a magnet pulling me forward. There was always a girl to chase, to make laugh, to move forward with. And when my heart skipped – when I felt a bit like falling forward – I thought maybe the world was spinning into place, that my heart was just re-adjusting to the knowledge of a new fate.

My quest for love, for women, for following my heart, eventually led me to a girl named Olga. Not just a girl. But **THE GIRL**, in big, bold, all-caps letters. That's the way it felt when I was fifteen – like all possible paths had to have led to meeting her, that it was inevitable, that it was fate. My silly heart beat like crazy the day I met her – it skipped beats.

My heart skipping is not hyperbole – later, I'd learn in detail about my heart, how it was broken, how parts of it couldn't communicate with one another, how radical cells had taken shelter in my atria and were confusing the ventricles that lay within, telling it when to beat and when not to beat, like terrorists blasting orders to America through a megaphone on the White House lawn. But then, my heart wasn't quite broken then – maybe it was on its way, maybe it was just a slight out-of-sync rhythm. I'm not sure what my heart was doing then.

It turned serious when I was nineteen – I almost fainted at an Alkaline Trio concert. I tried to ignore it. Breathing would be hard. The air would be too thick, or I would be too weak, and I would just feel like falling forward. I told my father on the third day of these episodes – a half hour later I was in a hospital bed with pads sticky-glued to

spots on my chest, leg and arm. I was hooked up to an EKG machine that monitored my heart.

“Is this dangerous?” I asked. I was in shock.

The nurse looked up at me from the machine. It was printing something. The beating of my heart translated into scribbles on paper.

“Is what dangerous?”

“The machine.” My words felt strange, like they were not quite leaving my lips, like they were moving slower through the air than they should be.

“It’s perfectly safe. What it’s doing right now is monitoring your heart beats to get a more accurate picture of how your heart is working over a short space of time.”

It sounded practiced, rehearsed. I was not her first broken heart.

The nurse tore off the EKG printout, looks down at it, then back at me.

“How do you feel?”

“Better than I did.”

“You don’t feel dizzy, or tired, or anything?”

“No. Why?”

She looked down at the sheet.

“Because your heart stopped for four seconds while we were talking.”

The world became blurry. My heart skipped a beat. Four beats. Six? How many beats are in a second?

My father – he was there, he was next to me, he was worried – says, “How is that possible?”

They moved me to a different room, on the cardiology floor, the eighth floor, the window overlooking the entire hospital. And the hospital was like a city – people and restaurants and jobs and housing for the sick. I was a citizen now, in a borrowed room. In the hospital where my mother died.

There were tests – in a whirlwind succession. Ultrasounds, more EKGs, heart monitors and pulse-checking and people asking about my medical history.

My condition was called tachycardia, complicated by sinus palpitations. My heart would stop and start whenever it pleased, at whatever heart rate it wanted. The upper chambers of my heart were not communicating with the lower parts. The doctor said it was the sort of condition that was not unheard of in men in their fifties or sixties, but I was nineteen.

“I’ve never seen someone with this condition under 55,” the doctor said. “Your case is highly unusual. I think we’ll need to do surgery. I’ll give you some pamphlets, let you look them over. But there’s a chance we may have to install a pacemaker.”

Pacemaker.

There were two invasive procedures to be done. If the first worked, the second wouldn’t be necessary. They were going to put wires in the veins in my thighs, thread them until they were near my heart, and try to blaze the radical cells that were causing the heart malfunction. If this failed, they were going to give me a pacemaker.

An hour later, I decided that I need to start writing. To everyone. Just in case.

I asked my father for privacy. I didn’t look at the pamphlets. I didn’t want to think about being cut up. I didn’t want to know.

But death, I began to fear, might be a very real possibility soon.

So I opened a blank Word document and I stared at it.

I wrote a name.

Dear Olga,

I stopped. Was she really my first thought? Olga?

It all begins with a girl, I suppose. The movies, the books, the television shows.

Olga is my girl. Was my girl.

They'll be time for the others, I thought. This is the letter I need to write.

Dear Olga,

The cursor blinked in and out beneath her name.

III

My mother told me a story once.

We were in the car, on the way to school – the first day or the second of my freshman year, before she got sick, before the world was colored in the awareness of life and death.

The Monotones' "Who Wrote the Book of Love?" was on the radio. I was thinking of a girl I'd just met. "Tell me, tell me, tell me, who wrote the book of love? I've got to know the answer."

So suddenly, I had to know the answer.

"This guy's right, mom. Who did write the book of love, anyway?"

"I don't know," she said. "But whoever's writing it, they've got a fucked up sense of humor."

I laughed. "No kidding."

“Their love story ended in tragedy, anyway.”

“Whose?”

“The people who wrote this song. A man wrote it for a woman he loved. And it ended in heartbreak.”

I’m not sure where my mother heard this, but it wasn’t true. I didn’t know that, then.

“Why?”

“Because, kiddo, every book of love ends in heartbreak.”

“All of them?”

“Most.”

I thought of her and my father, who’d been divorced when I was six. We drove in silence for a while.

“If it all ends in heartbreak, then why do people bother?”

“Because when you see that special person, you know.”

“That you love them?”

“That it’s worth it. That despite all the heartbreak and absence and fading out at the end, what you had, what you could have had, what you might someday have is worth every single moment of pain.”

Olga told me years later how she saw me one day in the hallways of school. I was walking down the hall, my long blonde hair falling past my shoulders, laughing with a girl she didn’t know. She was sitting, leaning against a locker, reading her Spanish textbook and wondering about the difference between *pensar* and *imaginar*.

I didn't see her. I kept walking, never knowing the importance of some girl sitting down reading a textbook, eating a sugar cookie, staring at me. She wrote it down in her notebook – me, in the hallway, with long blonde hair, smiling, laughing with a girl. She wondered if she could be that girl.

She kept her ears open, just in case someone ever said something about the boy she'd seen, keeping track of names and gossip she heard in the hallways. Which one was he? Who was he? Until one day, she heard the news.

“That's Alex,” somebody said, pointing to the boy with the blonde hair, “the one whose mom is in the hospital. Cancer. Jenna said his mom probably won't survive the weekend.”

She wanted to speak to him. Once she saw him in the hallway, walking past, and she wanted to say something, anything. Hello. I'm sorry. I always wanted to speak to you, do you know who I am, do you believe in love at first sight, do you believe in life after death, I'm so sorry for your mother. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry, I am.

Then, she died. His mother. It was all over school. There were two or three or four grief cards being passed around. Everyone signed them. They wrote things like, “Sorry, man!” and “My condolences,” never knowing how much their words would mean to the boy or whether he'd even know who they were. It didn't matter – someone's mom had died. In the world of high school, this was an impossibility.

She thought about signing one. She'd write small, in simple block letters: “I'm sorry for your loss.” Something so humble, so basic. Why did it seem so weird to write? He didn't know who she was. She didn't know who he was. How could he know her? Didn't he always walk past her in the hallways, never looking at her?

I didn't know about the girl in the hallways. I didn't even see the hallways at all. The week after my mom passed, I walked in a daze, swirling past people and places, a spinning top person with a cheap smile planted on my face so no one would even know how I felt inside.

There was a dagger. It was my mother's. A Star Trek collectible item made to look like a Klingon blade. It was one of her most prized possessions. It was mine now, like everything she had.

One night, on the floor of my bedroom, I couldn't take it anymore. The people, the emotions, the everything. The whole world poised to make me feel better – me, who was I? Who were they? My mother's body was in the ground and now they are going to tell me “oh are you okay are you okay are you okay?”

Me? I was fine.

Until that day with the dagger. I don't even know what happened. I was filled with – something. The dagger just sort of came out, with me sitting on the floor of my bedroom, running the steel across the vein on my arm.

I made little white incisions – not deep enough to cut, but deep enough to be seen for several days. I wasn't thinking, there was no thought. It was just the steel, my veins, the floor, the emotions and the constant thought of “Who do they think they are? Who am I?” both repeated like a mantra. As though their very concern was an assault on the memory of my mother. As though my continued existence was shameful.

Then, a small plunge. A little drop of blood on my arm. Then, my heart – it was beating funny.

Wait.

It was like waking up. A small spot of blood, not even a lot, a droplet on my arm.

The knife in my hand. The bedroom floor.

And all I could think was, *How did I get to this point?*

And, *What would my mother think?*

And, *How do I move forward from this?*

Dear Olga,

I hope you never have to read this letter.

But soon, they say I'm going to go into surgery. Tomorrow, probably. Tomorrow – July Fourth. I feel like there is an irony to the date, but I just can't make sense of it.

They might give me a pacemaker on Independence Day. They'll give me a second chance at life. And I'll take it. I'll do it all differently.

You have no idea how scared I am. I've never really thought about my heart. It's just an organ. But blood is life. The heart is life. Every part of me that makes me me is there because my heart pumps blood to every part of me. And now, they say it's broken.

Now, I know that's ironic – my broken heart. It's not a funny irony. It's just odd timing, I suppose.

A few months after my mother died, I was lying in the grass with Olga, watching the stars. Her hand was near my hand. Both of them were sweaty. It was June and the air was warm.

“I feel...” I paused. “Bored.”

I turned my head toward her. She looked at me from inches away.

“Do you know what I do when I’m bored?” she asked.

“What’s that?”

“I draw black boxes.”

I’d been working up the courage to kiss her for months. I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. I was tired of absence – I was tired of everything ending in loneliness. Life, love, relationships, friendships, family – all of it ended with a certainty. That’s where the nervousness came from. To fall into someone, to make them a part of you, it ends in loneliness. Isn’t that what happened with my mother? My father left her, to find love elsewhere. My mother, she dated after that, but not the way my father did. He loved with his whole heart; she had no more space there to give anyone. For her, there was one love and it was gone. Now, she would never have a chance.

Was there a difference between confused atria and heartbreak? Was there a difference between ventricles that would not communicate and a tongue that won’t speak its pain?

Laying there in the grass beside Olga I remembered one time, on a particularly bad day, before the cancer, when my mother’s arthritis was hurting her so bad even the pain pills weren’t helping. She looked at me and said, “If I didn’t have you, kiddo, I’d commit hara-kiri.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s Japanese ritual suicide. Samurais, when they were dishonored, would take their swords and split open their stomachs.” My mother acted out the gesture, making

noises that sounded vaguely Japanese. She mimed pulling out her sword and stabbing it into her stomach, sticking her tongue out and closing her eyes.

“Why would you say that?”

“I’m just kidding,” Mom said, still pretending to hold the handle of the blade in her stomach. I didn’t think it was funny.

“Hey, look,” Olga said, breaking me from my memory. “Did you see that? A shooting star!”

“Oh, man, I missed it!” I said. I looked up to the sky and there was nothing but regular, stationary stars. But that’s an illusion, too – all those stars were burning rocks somewhere, with pieces of Earth floating around them. Then—yes! A blaze across the sky, with a long, long tail, spanning an inch, spanning miles, spanning galaxies.

“There! Did you see that one?”

“No, I didn’t. But you have to make a wish. You have to.”

“Right, a wish,” I said as my heart beat funny. I looked over at Olga, studied her face. This is the present. Me and a girl and a bright brilliant sky and freshly cut June grass in the middle of the night. Me and a girl and a desire to kiss her despite the fact she might die like everyone – we all die. We all do.

But *we* are alive. We are alive. In spite of death, we survive. “Okay, I got one,” I said and dammit if I didn’t want to bridge the gap right then and kiss her with everything I had, tasting her and breathing her in like the sweetest and only sign of life in this universe.

She and I and a rock circling another rock – we were all there was.

Listen, I know I've been an asshole. I want to explain why.

I met you right after my mother died. The timing was odd. I was depressed and near-suicidal, taking the kind of insane chances people should never take.

But you were different from anyone I knew. I knew it when I met you. Or maybe I just think I did. Maybe we rewrite our memories when we think back upon them, with whatever kind of revisions that make our life make the most sense.

I needed someone without even knowing I needed anyone. I needed someone new. Someone who wouldn't walk on eggshells around me just because my mother had died. You treated me like there was nothing wrong with me – like nothing bad had happened.

You know when I knew I loved you? I'll tell you.

We were at a party at a friend's house, a couple weeks after we started dating. We were both fifteen. We were in a side bedroom, making out on a bed. There was a game of twister going on in the other room.

She smiled up at me as I pulled back from her. My heart was pounding. I could feel it beat irregular. My own personal superstition since that day with Jenny was that if my heart ever did something crazy, it means that whatever I was doing was a good idea.

I looked down at her, studying the sweat on her forehead, the mole on her cheek, the way when she smiled her top lip and her bottom lip didn't quite stay together.

"I'll be right back," I said and I ran from the room. Olga sat up, shocked.

Outside I found Kira, a mutual friends of ours, who was hosting the party.

“How do you say ‘I love you’ in Russian?” I demanded to know. Olga was Russian, from Moldova. She’d come here when she was five. Kira was Ukrainian and would know the answer. After explaining why I wanted to know, she told me.

“Ya tibiya liebleu.”

“One more time?” I said with a laugh.

She repeated it and then I repeated it and then I went back to the bedroom.

Olga was lying on the bed, smiling at me, looking a bit uncertain.

So I said it to her – that I love her, in Russian, in her native tongue, the language she spoke as a child, the language of her people.

Olga didn’t have the heart to tell me at the time – she told me years later – but my Midwestern tongue, unused to the gooey syllables and hard consonants of Russian, horribly mispronounced the words Kira had taught me. Instead of “I love you,” what I actually said in that beautiful moment was “I kill you.” I’d never spoken Russian before.

But even so, in that room, in that bed, she held me close and whispered “I love you, too.”

It was the second day we’d ever spoken. It was a casual conversation. Do you remember? I ran into you and your friend on my walk home from school. Somehow ethnicity came up. I said you looked French.

You laughed, said you weren’t French. Then you got this far away look. And you said, “Well, maybe my mother was French.”

And even though I’d just lost my mother and I should have known better, I laughed. I said, “How can you not know whether your mom was French?”

And your whole face tightened. Your lips, your forehead, your jaw. Everything except your eyes. Your eyes were still soft. They were...sad.

And you said, "It's been a long time since I talked to her." And that was it. Your friend changed the subject and your face became relaxed again. But I felt like for a moment, you were real. And the real you – not the you that everyone sees, not the you that you are on the day-to-day, hour-to-hour, week-to-week basis – the real you shined through. You were strong and vulnerable. You'd seen things I could only imagine. You'd lived a life, perhaps more than anyone I knew. I wanted to know you. I wanted to know everything.

I slide the shirt off her shoulders, bring her down to the bed. We move with the motions of two people who know no way stronger to show their affection than rub skin against skin and push against pull until we're both half-naked on the bed, hair becoming tangled, lips entwined, tongues finding each other in the darkness of a room.

Our skin alive with goosebumps, hard breath on shivering skin in the coldness of the basement of her house. Her parents are away, this is our only chance alone, let these movements of our hips serve as a devotion to the one-ness we feel together.

Then...heart. Beating. Fast. It was not beating right. It was not...

I pulled away, sat up on the bed.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I don't..." I paused. I put two fingers to my neck, feeling for a pulse. It was rabid, like an elevator cord suddenly gone slack and falling.

"I need some water."

I stood up in the room, walked up the stairs, shirtless, wearing only jeans. In the kitchen I drank water, studying the pictures of Olga and her family on the fridge.

Slow, slow, now, heart. Slow down. Easy. I breathed. I sipped water. My stomach, my lungs, my heart. Something was wrong.

What was fate trying to tell me? What was my heart telling me? Was this wrong? Was my body reacting this way because something is off here? This is **THE GIRL**. Didn't my body know that? Didn't my heart, my pulse, my organs know? If I could feel it, why couldn't my body? Didn't my heart know this was right? This was what aliveness was all about.

“Are you okay?” Olga is at the top of the stairs, with a blanket around her, hiding her nakedness.

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, yeah, I'm fine.”

That's when I knew I loved you. And even though now I've become this person that can't let go of the past, even though now I could never, ever, go back to being friends – even though you say my love has become this sort of sick joke that you say I use as a weapon against you – then, it was pure. I loved you for you and for no other reason.

You are one of the most amazing people I have ever known. And I've been better for knowing you.

We fell into each other the way some people fall into alcohol or work or drugs – we lost ourselves in the facts, emotions and physicality of the other – we became one, tangled, thrown into each other. Lost.

There were other men and other women – they’d come between us for a while, but we’d always find our way back.

But one day, we ended. We were driving back from the movies and Olga said I wasn’t spontaneous. So I pulled down a random side street and drove until we discovered a park.

“This isn’t spontaneity,” she said, “You’re only doing this because you’re trying to prove something.”

This somehow devolved into a break-up. There was screaming and crying and horrible words.

Two weeks later, she was dating someone new. She stayed in a relationship – with one person or another – for the next eight years.

And me? It took me years to stop loving her, to stop trying for her.

Please don’t remember the me that you’ve known for the last year – remember me as the man you knew when we were together. Back when I was gentle and nice and was only there to love you instead of trying to prove something.

If I survive this, things will be different. I promise you that. If I don’t, just know that I love you. You are in my thoughts, now. That must count for something.

Alex

The last time we spoke before I went to the hospital was horrible.

I was smoking (I was always smoking), standing outside of her car and talking to her through the window because she wouldn’t let me smoke in her vehicle.

The topic was well-worn.

“Don’t you remember,” I said in-between quick puffs, “the way it was before?”

“I remember,” she says.

“Remember the couch cushion we stole from out on the road? Remember when we took it to the park, lay down watching the stars, almost touching?”

She nodded.

“Remember the way it felt? And the way you felt about me? Where did it go? Why do I still love you after all this time and now you look at me like none of it ever happened?”

She was silent.

“Someday I will write about this,” I said, “about you. About me. How we came together, how we fell apart. I promise you I will write that.”

“Stories are meant to be told,” she said. And that was all she said – to this day, all these years later, I have no idea what that means.

Then I started crying, dropped my cigarette, fell backwards to the concrete and sat there. She did not open her door or comfort me. I held my head in my hands.

I was pathetic. We both knew it. I don’t know how she stood being around me. Every time it was the same. I’d beg her to return us to a place *before*. It was always before. Before she fell out of love with me, before she left me for another man, before we broke up.

I was never the kind of person who understood the past tense. I never have been.

IV

The second day at the hospital, she came to visit me.

My dad was at my side, but he left the room politely when she entered.

She looked pale, worried. Her hair was pulled back from her face in a high ponytail on her head. She was dressed like she just came from the bakery where she worked. Some white powder was on her pants. Flour, maybe, or sugar.

“Hi,” she said quietly.

“Hey,” I said.

I had already written her letter, but I didn’t mention it.

She sat in the seat my dad had been sitting in, on my left, near the window. I silently thanked God that I did not have a roommate yet in my hospital room. I pulled the sheet over me a little tighter around my body.

“How are you?”

“Okay.”

She scrunched her lips to the left side of her face for a second. It was an expression of worry and nervousness.

She opened her bag.

“I made you a word search. Four, actually.”

She pulled out a big poster board with four word searches on it, their categories in big words above them.

“I figured you’d be pretty bored. I didn’t list what the exact words were in the word searches, but I’m pretty sure they’re really easy so you’ll be able to figure them out, even without the words. There’s only ten words per word search.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I hope you like it.”

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“I was worried,” she said. “Do you want me to go?”

“No,” I said, really quickly. “It’s fine, no, please stay.”

She took my hand and smiled at me. We sat in silence.

In the hospital, I wrote my dad a letter, too. It was short. How do you condense the words you want to express to a parent into the space of a letter? My dad had been there through everything – my mother’s death, my break-up with Olga, my hospitalization, my high school graduation.

I started it many times.

Dear Dad,

I wanted to tell you my thoughts but I just don’t know how to begin.

Dear Dad,

Do you remember that story you told me once about driving in Detroit late at night near the train tracks?

Dear Dad,

I wish we could go back to a time of before – before the hospital, before adulthood, back when I was a kid and we’d make macaroni and cheese together in the

kitchen before watching Drew Carrey on that tiny television in the living room, in your house in Ferndale. Do you remember those days?

But what I most feared, more than anything, was not surviving and having my dad find a letter that went like this:

Dear Dad,

And then nothing. So, my final letter was short. It was the best I could do. It read:

Dear Dad,

Thank you. For everything you've done for me. I love you.

Alex

I wanted to write more. If every word deleted from a word document appeared as a penny in real life, there were probably hundreds of dollars of unsaid words. But that letter was all that remained.

Luckily my letter to him is only a story now – an afterthought in the middle of another, larger tale. Luckily, he will never read that letter.

The written words aren't enough. It all feels so...inadequate.

How do you tell your father his friendship and presence in your life is the thing you fall back on the most when the world gets hard? And how do you do it and have it mean more than a few lines in a Word document on a laptop in a hospital room?

It isn't my broken sinus node that silences my tongue – but sometimes I want to blame my heart for everything.

I didn't want to have to say goodbye. I didn't want to have to say anything. My father is my father, just as I am his son.

Any words to quantify that relationship just...aren't enough.

In the middle of the night, a nurse woke me.

“Have you ever used cocaine?”

“What? No.”

“You shouldn't have this condition at your age,” she said. “Tachycardia, sinus palpitations...you're only 19. You've never done cocaine?”

“No,” I said, fighting the sleep. “I've taken adderrall before and crushed it up. I've smoked pot and drank alcohol. I'm a smoker.”

“No, no, no,” she said. “None of that would cause this. You must've used cocaine. Or meth. A heart does not break this way at your age without cocaine.”

I looked up at her, “I really, really haven't.”

“You can tell me the truth.”

I rolled over and went back to sleep.

Once, after Olga and I broke up, I was driving and stopped to smoke in a parking lot.

A few minutes later, I saw her walking down the street nearby. I didn't say hello, didn't move, didn't even drive away. I just watched her as she slowly walked across the way. She was smiling to no one, to herself. It was nice to see her smile.

I wanted to do everything – floor it and get out of there, say hello, run over and kiss her, consequences be damned. I wanted to get into a fight with her. I wanted to talk with her about anything at all, walk slowly and sweetly beside her, hands in pockets, sheepish smile on my face. I wanted to demand she explain all of her actions and mine, too, while she was at it. I wanted to ask her – more than anything – how love fails.

“It's like this,” the doctor explained to me the day of the procedure, “radical cells have taken over your ventricle. They're confusing the rest of your heart, telling it to beat when it shouldn't beat, telling it not to when it should. These radical cells are confusing your heart to the point of injury. You're lucky you never passed out from this condition. Sometimes, your heart thinks it needs to beat at 140 beats per minute. Other times, it thinks it's working just fine, but isn't beating. It's not a sustainable way to live.”

I nodded.

“For this reason, today I want to do two procedures – first, we are going to try to burn away the radical cells. If this fails, we will need to install a pacemaker.”

He picked up a small device, shaped like a lima bean, no wider than a baseball, no thicker than a finger.

“This is what a pacemaker looks like. This is what we will use, if all else fails, to help your heart beat.”

He handed it to me. It fit easily into the palm of my hand.

“It’s so...small.”

“The original pacemakers were quite a bit bigger,” he said. “But in recent years, they’ve been getting smaller and smaller.”

“How is it powered?”

“Batteries. If we end up installing a pacemaker, you will need to have your batteries changed every five to seven years.”

“Changed? Like, surgery again?”

“Yes.”

I thought of all the famous cyborgs throughout history – the terminator, Data from Star Trek, Cyborg from DC comics. When I was little, I used to pretend to be Data on the playground. I wasn’t really playing the game with anyone else. I’d just walk around stiffly, like a robot, turning my head like a bird to look at things. Now I was going to have a machine inside of me, helping me, becoming a part of me.

I looked down at the pacemaker in my hand.

“It’s just so...small.”

They cart me into yet another clinical, white room. Here my groin will be shaved – and if I had any hair on my chest, that would be shaved, too. Here I will be pumped full of drugs. Here is where my heart will beat on its own for the last time.

I left my father sitting just outside the curtain. He smiled faintly at me as they carted me into the room, holding a mystery novel in one hand.

A white woman and a black woman are in the new room, both in their mid-forties, both wearing scrubs. The white woman's scrubs are that odd teal color nurses seem to love. The black woman's scrubs are white with little duckies on them. I like her immediately. Her smile is kind – there are wrinkles around the edges of her lips, as though she has been smiling since birth and her cheeks have folded to accommodate her.

The white woman approaches the side of the bed with a shaver.

“Now, I'm just going to shave underneath the testicles,” she says, without any trace of giggle that should accompany such an odd sentence.

“Okay,” I say. There is clear apprehension in my voice.

My gown is opened, lifted away from my private parts. The white woman says something – I think it is, “Oh, my,” a possible reference to the fact that I haven't ever shaved the hair on my groin before.

The shaver turns on and she gets to work. I lay there, letting her pick up my balls and move the shaver around. There is a huge awkwardness in the room. Earlier that day I offered to do it myself – but they insisted that someone on staff do it. So, there I lay, with a strange woman's hands on my balls. Silently, I thank God that I find neither of them sexually attractive. The only thing that would make this more awkward is an erection.

“During the procedure,” the black woman says to my left and I turn to face her, “would you rather be more awake or more asleep?”

She's put on a face mask and she's holding an empty hypodermic needle, looking over a small cart full of colored bottles.

“Asleep,” I say. I’m terrified. I can feel my heart beating irregular. I wonder if it would be beating irregular right then even if I didn’t have a heart condition.

“Okay, sweetie,” she says, and even though I can’t see her mouth anymore, I know she is smiling – something in her eyes, “I can do that.”

“All done!” the white woman says from down below.

“Thank you,” I say and I’m not sure what I’m thanking her for. To her credit, she was gentle – in later years when I’d try doing this myself, I always seemed to accidentally pull a hair or fold the skin in a slightly painful way.

The black woman has readied her needle. She walks to my hand, where they put my IV.

“I got lots of goodies for you here,” she says, “so you should be under for the duration of the procedure.”

She slides the needle into my IV and I watch the liquid drain out of the needle as she pushes down on the dropper.

“There’s a chance you’ll wake up,” she says. “But I’ll be right there by your side if you do, with plenty more goodies.”

I nod. My hand and my arm feel a little cold, as the “goodies” move up and into my veins.

The white woman starts talking, “The doctor instructed me to remind you of what is going to happen during the procedure.”

I nod.

“First, we are going to attempt an electromagnetic ablation. We will begin by running small wires up through the arteries in your thighs here and here,” she points at

my thighs, which are still exposed to the air, since no one put the gown back, “and run those wires up to your heart. When they’re where they should be, we will attempt to burn away the radical cells which have created the disturbance in your heart. If the shocking attempt fails, we will then install a pacemaker.”

She pauses. I don’t know what response she wants. They’ve already explained this to me. A second, third or fourth explanation didn’t make me feel any more comfortable.

“The pacemaker will go right in between the muscle and the fat of your chest,” she says, “so no matter how athletic you become in later years, or how much weight you gain or lose, the pacemaker will always be exactly where it needs to be. Hopefully, if the electromagnetic ablation works, there will be no need for a pacemaker. Do you understand all of this?”

I nod. My father is on the other side of the curtain which surrounds me, the white woman and the black woman. I wonder what he thinks of all he’s overheard – the shaving, the goodies, the umpteenth explanation of the procedure.

“You should be feeling sleepy soon,” the black woman says, holding her hand to my wrist to feel my pulse and looking at her watch.

I do feel sleepy. The world seems a little green around the edges, a little yellow. Spots of color are floating a bit.

“Remember,” the black woman says, “I’ve got plenty of goodies.”

“Is it okay to sleep?” I ask. “And if I do, will I remember...”

Then I am out.

I wake up. The world is black and white at first, mostly shadow, a few impressions.

“He’s stirring!” a female voice says.

“Get him under control,” a male voice says sharply. “I haven’t finished with the incision.”

Something is pulling at my chest – there’s a feeling like an insect crawling or – maybe a tree branch sliding along exposed skin? What is that? Spots of color arrive. Blue, black, yellow.

I move my hand to touch my chest. What is that feeling? It itches. It itches and then...

Pain. Sharp, immediate, like someone is cutting into my skin, like someone is cutting out my heart, my broken heart, my useless organs – were they replacing them? Pain like fire, all over my chest and suddenly the whole world is clear in my vision, like when a camera suddenly snaps into focus.

I scream, loud, full-throated. I’m shocked by the deepness of my own scream – like a bear from rest.

A woman grabs my hand, places it back down on the bed. I turn to look at her – there is a yellow aura, blonde hair, long, falling to her shoulders – glasses, square rims – a mole along the cheek, stark against the whiteness of her skin. There is a kind smile, blue eyes, a furrowed brow...

“Olga?” I say. “Olga, I love you, I want you to know...” I scream then, loud and piercing, “I love you I love you I love....”

“Honey, honey, stop,” the woman says. I blink. She’s not Olga – she’s the black woman, in her forties, crinkled cheeks, syringe in hand. “Whoever you love – I got goodies.”

She injects me and I’m quiet again.

The doctor is holding what looks like a giant crayon to my chest, with a small knife at the end, finishing his incision right over the left top side of my rib cage. His face is hardened. He is not amused.

Across the room, a woman is standing nearby a heart monitor. I think she is my mother. I don’t call out – don’t say a word. She could morph into someone I don’t know. She could be a stranger.

“Nurse, get him under control.”

My arms have been flopping around, my legs kicking. I didn’t even notice that. Suddenly I stop. Was it me or the drugs?

I look to the ceiling and I swear there were words there waiting for me – the ceiling read, “You will be saved.”

“I love you, don’t leave me,” I say.

Then the colors of the room go dark.

“Here we are,” a voice says, though I don’t know who, “Room 8485.”

I blink, look to the ceiling. I’m being carted into a room.

My father is there, smiling down at me. Olga, too, I think, though she could be another apparition – they both could be.

“Dad, I,” but I’m not sure if I’m talking, or even what I would be saying if I was – but I try harder anyway, “Dad, I!”

Then I fall asleep again.

It was the Fourth of July – independence day. I woke up about half a dozen times, but none I remember. Until the fireworks started.

Olga and my father were there, in the room. My room was on the eighth floor and in the window there was a wide expanse of sky – fireworks are booming off in the distance, separated a little, as though two or possibly three different cities were having their fireworks shows at the same time.

“I saw you,” I said to Olga.

“What?”

“During the procedure, you were there, but you weren’t.”

Neither my dad or Olga spoke. Did I sound crazy? I didn’t mean to.

“Those fireworks are amazing,” I said.

“Yeah,” Olga said.

“I think they’re from different cities,” my dad said. “Southfield, maybe, and Troy.”

They sat and I lay in silence, all of us watching the multi-colored explosions celebrating the birth of America. And my heart did not feel funny – it did not stop. My chest was sore, but the magic that was within my chest – the thing that I used to guide me all these years – seemed absent.

But the sky is an explosion of color – red and blue and yellow swirling orbs through the sky.

“I feel born again,” I think, and maybe even say, “like everything is different but everything is the same.”

V

The Roman poet Horace, the man who made the phrase “carpe diem” famous, once wrote in his Ode 1.11, “How much better it is to accept whatever shall be, whether Jupiter has given many more winters or whether this is the last one, which now breaks the force of the Tuscan Sea against the facing cliffs.” While the Greeks and even most of the Romans held out for world-shattering events to occur to change the way they lived, Horace was much more practical. This world can end – will end. And not the world, really, but just the world with you in it.

At any moment, the Tuscan Sea can swallow us all whole.

My father told me a story once.

He was driving in Detroit at night, behind some slow driver, back in the 70s, back when Detroit was still decaying, rather than decayed, as it is now. He was late for something. He doesn't remember what. The woman in front of him refused to go faster, no matter how close he got to the woman's car.

My father's radio was blaring some 1970s pop tune. “Bennie and the Jets,” maybe, or “American Woman.” The woman in front of him started to slow down, nearly stopping. My father, angry, swerved around her car and sped past her.

There was a train coming. In Detroit, there aren't many signs for things like trains. He didn't hear the whistles, the grinding of the tracks, the movement of the boxcars, because the radio was too loud.

So he slammed on his brakes. The train moved forward. His tires howled. There was rain hitting the windshield. There was pop music in the air mixing with the screeching of brakes, the movement of gears, the sliding of tires on wet pavement.

And then – it stopped. His car, the woman's car. Everybody stopped. The train moved on. He would survive.

That is life, I think. That's death, too. Random chance; speeding around cars, never knowing whether it is flying trains or wide open road ahead.

The timeline is clear – if my father had died that day, every event which followed wouldn't have happened, including my birth.

“Sometimes,” my father says over coffee one morning when telling me this story, “you have to look for these things. You have to be careful.”

When I was six, my parents got divorced. They were separated since I was two. But my father officially began the process of divorce in the middle of the night. I was scared a lot at night in those days, my mother lying in my bed with me to comfort me from the dark. The phone rang and she arose to answer it.

I heard crying from the next room. It was my mother's sobs, her heaving breaths carrying down the hallway. My six-year-old mind thought that a villain must've entered the house. I pictured the Penguin, from the Batman cartoon show, in there with my mother. Maybe he was trying to kidnap her.

Since Batman wasn't around, I picked up a toy laser gun I had and I walked out into the hallway, ready to battle with the forces of evil. But it wasn't a Batman villain in there with my mother. My mother was crying because her whole world had just fallen apart.

So I put down the gun and I held her in her bed as she cried. I didn't understand the word "divorce" because it wasn't something I'd ever encountered before. When she described the concept to me, I asked her how it was different from being separated. Wasn't "divorce" what they were already doing? This question made my mom cry harder.

The next time I saw my dad I asked him why he made my mom cry and why he wanted a divorce. He said because he didn't love her anymore and didn't think they were soul mates. Here was another concept I'd never heard before. What's a soul mate?

"A soul mate is someone who makes you feel complete," my father said over a cup of coffee at the breakfast table. "It's someone who shares your interests and makes you feel whole."

Then he told me how some people believed everyone has a soul mate. I asked if I had one.

"Sure," my father said.

I asked my dad once in the fifth grade how you know when you're in love. I also asked him what you were supposed to do if you thought you were in love. He responded, as he sometimes does, by telling me a story of his own life.

“When I was in fifth grade,” he began, “the girl who sat behind me would tap me on the shoulder every day for a week and say she liked me. I’d look back over my shoulder and smile awkwardly. She’d ask me if I liked her. I didn’t have an answer, I could never think fast enough to really tell her how I felt. Truth is, I wasn’t sure.

“So the weekend came and I sat and I thought about it. Did I like her? What was I going to say on Monday, when she asked? Finally, I decided I did like her. I decided that, without a doubt, I wanted to kiss this girl.

“So the next day in class, I was prepared. I wore a nice shirt. I combed my hair. I wanted to be ready for when this girl asked me the question.

“But she didn’t tell me she liked me, and she didn’t ask me if I liked her, not that day. By lunchtime, I’d learned that she liked another boy. I was heartbroken. I finally made up my mind, and there went the chance.”

During my recovery, I spent a lot of time in bed or on the couch watching television shows. The drugs they gave made me feel airy, like my body wasn’t quite touching the bed, like my head was grazing the ceiling.

Olga would visit me often, lying with me in bed, bringing activities for me to do. Once we painted. Another day we watched a good portion of the third season of Friends.

It was in bed one day that I told her definitively about my vision in the hospital – how the black nurse transformed into her, how she transformed back and how the ceiling told me I would be saved.

“I think you’re my soul mate,” I said. “I think we’re supposed to be together.”

“That isn’t what this is,” she said. “I’m not here to get back together. I’m here to help you through a tough time.”

These words cut through everything.

“I thought...you almost lost me, that doesn’t change your mind about love and you and me and everything else?”

“No,” she said simply, as she held me in my bed, our eyes and lips and faces inches apart. “I’m just here to make you feel better.”

I cried then, loud and hard, and she held me in my bed. I’d survived the breaking of my heart – I had a machine now to regulate my beats. But Olga’s final rejection was too much for me to take. I tried to kiss her anyway. She pulled away, but kept holding me. She held me until I stopped crying and then fell asleep. And then she left, shutting my door behind her.

Did she pause? Did she kiss my forehead? Was she ever there at all?

Part 2

I

“—the method of loci,” the woman who would become my girlfriend said on our first date, over sushi, in October of 2011. I will call this woman Paige, though that is not her real name.

“What?” I said. I was a little distracted. My heart had fluttered a bit – it was beating funny. It didn’t do that so often anymore, not since the pacemaker, not for years. My old superstition was kicking up.

“The method of loci,” she said, smiling at me over a fork full of rice and shrimp. “There’s a psychological theory that we can store information by viewing and perceiving actual, physical locations. Like if you tried hard enough, you could memorize the answers to a test by visualizing them as that TV set.”

“What? Really?”

“Yes,” she said. “I had a professor once who’d ask us to do that. We’d be studying for a test and he’d demand we look at the TV as he told us one thing, or the chalkboard as he told us another. He’d say that when it was time for the test, we’d thank him, because all we had to do was look at the chalkboard or the TV, and BAM! We’d have the answer.”

“Did it work?” I asked.

“Well,” she paused, laughing. “Yes. Most of the time.”

Weeks later, I’d ask her about it again.

“What about emotions?” I asked.

“What?”

“Can you store emotions in a place? And memories? If I tried hard enough, could I put every memory and emotion of you into my cell phone? Or my pinky? So every time I looked at it, I’d remember you, or whatever certain thing I wanted to?”

“Well,” she said. “Yes. No? I don’t know. Maybe. We didn’t cover that.”

Suddenly I wanted to know – what locations do we put ourselves into? If I can store everything on a physical location and it could be on my body...what was I storing in my body, in my heart, in my pacemaker?

II

I travelled 500 miles and started going to school at Northern Michigan University, in the winter of 2008, to get away from Olga, from the city I grew up in, from broken hearts and artificial pacemakers, from lack of purpose and not knowing what to do with my life. I guess I was going against the Method of Loci, then, though I hadn’t heard of it yet – I wanted a place where I remembered nothing.

That’s where I met Whirls. That is not her real name. She described herself so often as a Whirling Dervish, a girl uprooted from the Earth. She lived in a cabin 30 miles outside of town. All of her light bulbs were different colors, so every room was lit with blue or green or red. Every wall was painted with a mural – her work, someone else’s, it hardly mattered. The place looked like it belonged in an indie movie – like at any moment, Zooey Deschanel or Michael Cera were going to come out from behind a corner.

I remember the first time I sat in that place – Whirls had warned me. She said, “When you get here, don’t freak out, all right? It’s not your typical Earth home.” She said shit like that. “Earth home.”

We walked in together, in the pitch black of a March night in the Upper Peninsula. She guided me to the couch before turning on all the multi-colored lamps. Our skin looked orange. The ceiling, ordinarily brown, looked green. Everything was different, like viewing the world from the inside of a kaleidoscope.

“What do you think?” she asked, so recently met, so obviously nervous.

And I wanted to say, “Let’s never leave this place, let’s just scribble our existences on your walls until we are nothing but pictures and words and thoughts.”

And I wanted to say, “This looks like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

And I wanted to say, “I feel like I’ve come home.”

Instead I lit a cigarette, smiled over at her and gestured for her to sit down.

I met Whirls the same night I met Paige. It was her I talked to and dated first. This is not a subject Paige and I discuss.

I’d had a dream about Whirls before we met. *I think*. That was the trouble. It was over before it began because of that damn dream. It was the details of the dream that confused me, confused her, confused us – there was a girl with a long red scarf, standing in a bar, which had sawdust covering the floor.

So a few days later when I found myself in a bar matching that description, with a girl also matching that description, I knew something was happening – for the first time since my heart fell out from under me, I thought maybe this was all going somewhere. I was on an inevitable path leading me to an inevitable conclusion. My heart beat funnier than it ever had.

There was a pause in my conversation with Whirls, sitting there in the dim light of the bar, looking over at her, the night we met. She smiled, I averted my gaze, I looked back, she looked away. And then I spoke:

“Does it seem...” what was the word I was looking for? Like we were on stage? Like fate was playing a hand? Like everything was falling into place?

“What?”

“Does it seem like we were supposed to kiss just then?”

Whirls grinned and grabbed my face and pulled me close. That’s when I noticed the ear ring clamp dangling from one of her ears. I couldn’t see the wound where it went in, but if I had, I would’ve noticed a green and purple scab where flesh met metal. At that moment, all I saw was the small earth-colored and sun-colored globes dangling from her ear lobe.

“Why do you wear just one ear ring?” I asked.

She touched the ear ring and her smile faded.

Whirls got the ear ring, months before I met her, when she was contemplating suicide. She prayed to God for something more in her life. She wanted a sign that there was a reason for her existence.

She took an ear ring clamp, the kind that is for people who want to wear ear rings but don’t have pierced ears and forced it into her ear. She let the steel pierce into her skin, and held paper towel around the wound until it stopped bleeding. She made a deal with the universe – she said, “When this thing heals over, things will be different.” And she felt the universe agreed. Forces were at work to change the circumstances of her life.

Maybe.

All I can say for sure is that when she walked, you could hear her coming, because the ear ring made this jingling noise.

Olga told me a story once. It's hard for me to remember the details – this is the story the way I imagined it.

She said that when she was very young, there was a boy on the playground. He'd been in a fire. Scars cascaded across the left side of his face. The other kids all laughed at him, made fun of him. His eyes were set back in the mess of melted skin, pushed up against the flesh of his cheek, which was twisted and permanently pressed upward, as though the left side of his mouth was always – not quite grinning, but definitely pointed toward the sky. They were sky blue, though. Pleasant and bright and clear. That's what made her do it.

Do what? I don't remember. It was something kind. Maybe she kissed him in front of everybody. Maybe she offered to be his friend, or fought off a bully, or pushed a kid three times her size to protect him.

What I do remember, though, is the kid rejected it – he pushed her. Or he laughed at her. Or he ran away.

And I remember thinking, as I lay besides Olga, as she told me this story, in bed, hers or mine, I don't remember. But I remember thinking, why would he do that? Why would he reject kindness and love?

It's been years since that day and I still don't understand.

But I wonder where that kid is now, with his melted face and clear blue eyes.
Does he still fear love? Does he embrace the Tuscan Sea?

When I picture him now, I think he regrets it. I imagine he still gets a little scared when the wind picks up and it's really late and he's out in the night somewhere and he remembers, for only a moment, that he is alone and if he were to die – if the scars on his face became flames again and consumed him from the inside out, burning there on the street corner like a cigarette carelessly thrown away – no one would be there to help him, to mourn him, to gently put out his embers.

Or worse – he is on his way home to his loving wife, his two children, his perfect writing career, his healthy heart bouncing in his chest, his scarred, childhood face skin-graphed away. The problems of his childhood – some silly girl on the playground reaching out to him, some silly kids pointing and laughing at him – are a distant memory. His clear blue eyes no longer sit atop a mound of melted cheek. They stare out over alabaster skin. And when the wind is blowing and he's alone, he's not really alone at all, because everyone is right there to rescue him – from death, from loneliness, from the edge of Tuscan cliffs and the darkened seas below.

I know the truth, even if he doesn't – no one is ever there to rescue anybody.

Years later when Paige and I started dating, she told me she put an ear ring clamp in her ear, too, just like Whirls did. The two did it together. For her, it wasn't about God or the forest. It was about friendship.

“Why'd you take it out?” I asked.

“Because it hurt. And it was kind of stupid.”

It was fate. Whirls had prayed to God that night, looking into the pine needles and deer trails of the forest – prayed to God for me. And me? I dreamed her up. Clearly, this was fate – our relationship was blessed by God, kissed by destiny. She was the reason I traveled so far to go to school. It all made sense.

One night, Whirls and I were sleeping. She'd gotten up to get some water and accidentally tore the ear ring out. She cried while trying to stop the bleeding, silent so I wouldn't wake. The next morning I woke up to find her earring-less and she told me the whole story.

That earring meant everything to her. It was a sign of a covenant she made with God. It reminded her every day of that night and her prayer to find meaning for her existence. She thought it meant I was sent from God to show her there was meaning to life.

Later, she'd blame me – she'd say the earring falling out was a message that our relationship was never meant to be. That earring symbolized all that is holy for her, and when it fell out, she felt she'd fallen from God's grace and she thought it was my fault.

We believed steadfastly in the fate of the situation. More than details, more than each other, we believed that *something* had brought us together.

The last day, we broke up in a snow storm, standing in my parking lot. As she moved to her car to walk away, I shouted that I loved her. She said it back, wiping tears from her face. I asked her if she still thought it was fate. She didn't answer. She just closed the door and drove away.

III

One time, I went to see a doctor for a common cold. She asked me about my pacemaker and what condition I had. She said it was my youth that made her curious – I was 22 at the time. She said, “Why do you wear a pacemaker?”

“Wear it?” I asked. I’d never heard this particular phrase before. “I don’t wear it. It’s inside me.”

“I know that. But people use the word ‘wear’ in reference to pacemakers. What’s the reason you have it?”

“Oh,” I said. “I have tachycardia with sinus palpitations. The pacemaker kicks in for slow beats, but not fast beats.”

I wasn’t sure if this last bit was necessary to tell her, but hey, it never hurts.

“So your pacemaker fixed your condition.”

I had never thought about it like this.

“No, it’s not fixed. I still have it.”

“But it doesn’t trouble you anymore, right?”

Well, I couldn’t argue with her there – I ran, I smoked, I breathed and I drank. I lived a normal life. I had all the vices of a normal person with an unassisted heart.

“It’s like this,” the doctor said. “A person’s wrist may be shattered in five places, but if he gets a metal rod replacement, his wrist is no longer shattered, right? It wouldn’t work without the metal rod. That’s true. But as long as the metal rod is there, then there is no problem. He’s ‘cured’ of having a shattered wrist.”

“But that’s the thing, doctor,” I said. “I don’t want to have to live with a metal rod. I want to be cured for real.”

“What’s real?” the doctor asked as she took my blood pressure. I didn’t answer her. I thought about it. I want to ask her about wholeness – does someone with a metal rod in their wrist mourn the days when they were a complete human without assistance? Does a person with a terrible burn on their face feel less whole when they are skin-graphed back to health?

Sometimes I wish my pacemaker would fall out in the middle of the night, the way the earring did for Whirls.

Incidentally, I asked Olga about the boy with the burned face years later – in January of 2012, 11 years or so after she originally told me the story, after we had years of silence and one year or so of friendship. I told her how I wondered about him sometimes. I told her especially after gaining a scar of my own, less visible and less disfiguring, I thought about him.

She said, “What boy with a burned face?”

So I said, you know, you did something kind for him. You kissed him. Or something. And he pushed you away! She didn’t remember. So I said everything I could think of about him. Something about blue eyes? Molten flesh? The playground? Love versus pushing it away?

And she said, “Oh my God!”

She had forgotten him, the boy with the burned face and the story that so often entered my mind. Maybe at a certain point stories no longer belong to their owners. Maybe that story is mine and mine alone now.

IV

Five years. Five to ten years. That's how long the doctor said it would be before I had to have my battery changed.

"I'm going to make it right," I told everyone who would listen. "In five years, I will not be the same person I was before. I will quit smoking. I will be successful. I will find love. I will no longer need a pacemaker."

There was an extended recovery period. They sent me home with bandages all over my chest which needed to be changed every few hours at first, then every day, then every couple of days. They sent me home with plenty of pills.

Every day for two months, I tried to walk a mile. I would walk to the second traffic light and back. That was the mission.

The first day I tried walking, I only made it a block. I had to sit there until I was ready to walk back. It took an hour. I just sat on the curb, watching cars go by, smelling the car exhaust and cigarette smoke of the city, wishing I could just make it home. I wanted to cry. Or call someone for a ride.

Instead I just sat there. And then, finally, stood and walked back home.

The fourth day I made it a block and turned around and came home. I didn't have to stop at the corner at all. There were still five blocks to get the rest of the half mile, and then those same five blocks over again when I came back. It was a mission. I would do it.

I was so proud of myself for making it a block and back without stopping that I lit a cigarette on my back porch. I still had cigarettes from before. With bandages over my

scar and pain running through my left arm and chest, I smoked that cigarette. It felt like my first.

I smoked my first cigarette the day Olga broke up with me. We broke up many times before we finally broke up. This particular break-up didn't take. But I thought it would. And so, on top of a parking garage in downtown Birmingham, a suburb of Detroit, I smoked my first cigarette.

The smoke felt strange going down – like swallowing the worst air. But when I exhaled, it felt wonderful. I could see my breath. I could taste my breath. A few drags later and the friend I'd bummed it from asked me how I felt.

“I feel...” I started. “Good. Real good.”

Sometimes I wonder how different my pacemaker is from Whirls' ear ring. They are different in obvious ways – one is jewelry, one keeps me alive. She avoided suicide by putting an ear ring in her ear and making a deal with God – I avoided death by having a pacemaker installed. Weren't they both symbols of our existence?

One night, outside, smoking cigarettes, Whirls asked me, “Can I touch it?”

No one had ever asked me this before. I shrugged. I unbuttoned my shirt and let her run her fingers along the edges of the pacemaker. It sits in a small pocket made of flesh in the upper left section of my chest. It feels like a loose bone, like something dislodged, like something unnatural.

She leaned her head in and kissed it – this disgusting thing in my chest, this little piece of plastic beneath my skin.

I never told her how much that meant to me.

The fifth day, I was finally allowed to shower. They'd asked me to hold off – with the wound exposed, it could be dangerous. So my father helped me duck-tape plastic wrap across my chest, so that I would be able to go under the water without the pacemaker or the electric leads in my veins getting wet.

When I entered the shower and washed everything away – it felt great. So great I started crying. I didn't know if it was happiness. Or sadness. I was just crying, the water hitting my body, warm and wonderful, standing with my left collarbone just barely out of water range, just in case.

It was the second week of trying to walk a mile when I finally succeeded. That was the day I went to the Military Recruiting Center. I walked from one branch of the military to another to ask about recruitment with a slight bounce in my step. Every branch rejected me without so much as an entrance exam. My pacemaker alone was a perfectly good reason to reject me.

I didn't really want to join the military – I told them I wouldn't fire unless fired upon. But I did want – something. A purpose. Because the greatest question bubbling up from inside my stomach, rattling my mechanically assisted heart, reverberating throughout my ribcage, was this: why was I alive? If my pacemaker served as a reminder of my mortality, then what was I supposed to do with this slight mortal coil which so desperately I refused to shuffle off?

V

Whirls was a forbidden subject in my friend group. Whenever someone would mention her name, I'd get defensive, emotional and weird. Because the truth is that from the moment I saw the ear ring dangling from her lobe, I knew I wanted to save her. It sounds so egotistical. It sounds so terrible.

But if my funny-beating heart had turned serious – if I died – I would never have had the chance to have my heart broken that day in the snowy cold. Whirls was a whirlwind, an awe-encompassing tornado that wreaked my world. But she changed my life.

Because all of those things that she said was wrong with me – she was right. I spent three years changing my circumstances because every word she spoke was correct. Here is the list of things she told me in that terrible winter storm conversation:

- 1) I lack determination.
- 2) I did not take good care of myself.
- 3) I did not try very hard to know who she was.

I still don't on that last one. Whirls is a mystery. But I saw her at a concert recently with her new boyfriend – saw her laughing, dancing. Saw him kiss her forehead. And I smiled. Because even if I don't know how to avoid the Tuscan Sea, it was nice to see that she was happy. Finally.

The heart doc would later tell me there were two days in 2008 where my heart did something especially worrisome – the day I met Whirls and the day we split.

VI

In my head I always refer to psychiatrists as “head docs.” I’ve never once called one this to their face. But you go to a cardiologist for your heart. You go to a regular doctor for your physical health. Head doctors are for the brain.

So one time when I was 23, after Whirls broke up with me, I went to see a head doc for a brain problem I had. It was through the university – I could see the head doc three times for free and presumably after that my head would be cured. Or I’d have the necessary life skills to move beyond everything.

On the third visit, after Olga, my heart and my mother had spilled out somewhat involuntarily and more than a little casually, the head doc identified the problem with my brain.

“You lost your mother, your first, real, love and your sense of invulnerability within four short years, when you were still very young. This recent loss is just another one in your life. You need to take time to mourn.”

“Mourn what? My childhood?”

“Whatever it is you need to mourn.”

“How do I mourn?”

“People do it different ways. You have to do it the best way you know how.”

“And so if I mourn, that’ll change it?”

“Change what?”

“The way I feel. The way I view the world. This feeling like everything is an ending, always.”

“But what specifically do you mean? What are you trying to change?”

“Everything.”

The head doc looked at her watch. “I’m not sure we have time for that.”

I took mourning to mean a bottle of Jack Daniels and a larger bottle of vodka. I went to a party. I knew my limit and I ignored it.

Sometime later, I was throwing up on the patio of a friend’s house, a stranger’s hand on my back, rubbing in small circles.

“Nothing about this is right.”

“What?” the stranger asked.

“How will I ever feel whole again?”

The stranger laughed, “I don’t think your body’s going to miss any of that.”

My mother told me something once.

It was after my grandmother, her mother, died. I was ten, maybe eleven. We were watching television and not talking about grandma.

That’s when she said it – words that I’ve thought about often since she passed and even more since I got a pacemaker.

“The biggest hardship in life isn’t tragedy,” she said. “It’s the fact that the world moves on after something tragic.”

I’d heard the phrase “the world keeps on turning” before. But I’d always thought of it as something comforting. But my mother, she mourned it.

All those people in the whole world – all that time yet to happen. They were all reminders that the past was gone. Her mother was gone. And now, too, so is mine.

The summer before I started teaching, I went to visit my mom's grave. It was the first time I'd gone in years. It took me forever to find her grave. I had to ask one of the people who worked at the cemetery.

He drove back down with me, into the fields of graves. Whenever I enter the cemetery, I'm greeted with a statue of Jesus at a fork in the road. Though he is pointing to the left, the man who worked at the cemetery turned right. And so I followed him.

We walked the stones, looking for my mother's last name and the last names of her ancestors. Mallorys and Tallmans, Parkers and Johnsons. Until, finally, we found it.

My mother's stone had sunken in over the years, the edges of grass around it covering the top and bottom of her stone.

"Do you want her raised?" the man asked.

"What?" I said.

"Her stone. We can raise the stone, clear out the grass and make sure that for a few years at least, her gravestone won't sink into the ground so much."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I'd like her raised."

The man took down my number and my information and then went about his way.

I always feel so...inadequate talking to graves. Like I'm spilling secrets. If someone passes by, I pretend I'm not talking. My words are never for the living at a cemetery. I think that's the weirdest thing about it.

But this particular time, I was feeling down, questioning the universe, questioning everything. So I asked my mother for a sign she was listening – asked the universe, or God, or her, to prove to me she was out there somewhere.

I was so busy waiting for a sign I didn't even notice the doe walk up to my left, 10 feet away. It made me jump.

The man, who apparently wasn't far, called out to me, "You see that doe?"

"Yeah," I said. The doe was unafraid. It just sort of looked at me, then him, and ran off.

"You get many doe out here?" I asked.

"That's the first one I've seen."

I watched it run off, through the graves, until it disappeared beyond a hill, carrying most of my doubts with it.

"I love you," I whispered.

Four summers after I got my pacemaker, when I was 23, I met up with Olga again at a Starbucks nearby my hometown. It was the first time we'd talked in years. She looked the same and that was the weird part. I kept inspecting her face, looking a little too deeply, waiting for its features to change. But she was still the girl I'd fallen in love with when I was fifteen. Only now...now we were nearly strangers.

We talked about relationships we'd had. We talked about her family and mine. We ignored our past for a couple hours, slurping coffee late into the night. The café was twenty-four hours, we could sit in the big comfy chairs for as long as we wanted.

Until it was time to go. We parted with an awkward hug. I walked to my car, got in and began to drive. That's when I received a text message. And then another. And another.

They were from Olga. They said she was sorry. For how she treated me. For how it ended. For everything.

VI

Paige would break up with me, too. Absence, loneliness, the meaning of life – these are questions which still swirl in my head.

The story would be better if I could say that Paige and I went on to marry – that all of these events led us down a path, an inevitable path. Olga and I broke up and then my heart broke. I got a pacemaker, became invigorated and ended up at a university. I met and dated my future wife's best friend Whirls, and then finally, the path of my life led me to Paige's door.

We travelled the world. We married one fine day in July, in the Upper Peninsula church where her parents got married. Our two kids (the first completely accidental and the second planned,) a girl and a boy, had their own series of trials and tribulations – they fell in love and got hurt and sometimes got sick, but I taught them to have strong hearts and Paige showed them how to nourish their whole selves, body and soul. They lived happy lives and took care of us as we grew old and got fat and lived happy and in love, spending our lives telling each other popcorn stories on a couch or else travelling through woods and cities with smiles wide and hearts open.

Whirls ended up spinning out of town, starting a traveling restaurant she ran out of an old RV with the man I saw her at the bar with. The two had no kids and they loved every minute of their existence. She still sends me post cards sometimes. They refer to our old jokes. She even put an ear ring clamp back into her ear – “It’s been a couple years now and it feels like it’s a part of me.”

My dad met a woman, a nurse who works out of a Lansing hospital. The two of them adopted a South African orphan. Her name is Angela and she’s in the eighth grade now. I taught her how to throw a baseball, how to swing a bat. She’s a funny little kid, who loves writing and mathematics equally.

I finally met the boy with the burned face one day in a Detroit supermarket – his kids, inexplicably, also had burned faces. They were all happy, with twisted flesh and blue eyes sunk back into faces. His kids and my kids and Olga’s kids all played in the toy aisle while the three of us caught up near the deli.

Olga got married and had four kids. She met a Czech doctor and the two bonded over their experiences overseas in Eastern Europe as children. He played basketball semi-professionally and said he’d love to have a game one-on-one with me. I did my male ego thing and was a little rebuked by the offer but accepted, promising myself that I would somehow beat him and score more points than anyone in the history of basketball. But I could see Olga was happy with the Czech doctor and I relented and smiled and we all shook hands. Olga and Paige became friends and were part of the same book club.

They removed my pacemaker. Everyone, including my mother, was there for the removal surgery. I smiled up at them all, knowing I was healthy, knowing I had a place. I

quit smoking. I now jog regularly and I'm considering entering a marathon or two. Paige and I live in New York or Boise or St. Petersburg. Everyone is happy.

VIII

But happy endings – that's something I never really mastered.

When I was in the first grade, a month or two after my parents divorced, I found a robin's egg in my backyard, all speckled blue and white. I brought it in for show and tell one day. The entire time, waiting for my turn, I held the egg tightly in my hand. I still wanted it to hatch. I wanted it to grow into a big bird that would occasionally rest on my shoulder. It would fly away sometimes, but it would always come back.

When it was my turn for show and tell, I opened up my palm and discovered I'd held it too tight – the combination of heat and sweat and my tight grip broke it open, letting the yellow and the red and the white spread across my hand, a disgusting goo that would never grow into anything more.

Everyone thought I'd done it on purpose – that I'd smashed the egg and that was my show and tell. I cried for days over that bird – cried because I knew I'd held it too tightly, because I knew it would never become a bird, because I cared about it so much, because I knew it was my fault. Sometimes I thought that if I had just left it alone, it would've been fine on its own.

My pacemaker keeps a running tally – it has recorded every beat of my heart since July 4, 2006. It records when it kicks in, when my heart slows down, when it speeds up.

“You’re using your heart a lot more,” Sue, the nurse at my cardiologist’s office, told me in January of 2011. “Your pacemaker only kicked in once this year.”

“Once?”

“Once.”

“Does that mean that someday, I can get it removed?”

“Well, it’s very rare,” she said. “You’d have to talk about that with the doctor.”

Removal? Of my pacemaker? My whole heart, working on its own, without assistance? Independence from the machine? It was too good to be true.

“You are certainly using your heart more, though,” she said. “Look at these readings!”

I glanced at the screen and watched as she scrolled through several numbers and dates that meant very little to me – the translation of my heart beats into numbers and letters.

One day in late 2011, I told Paige, as we sat on her living room floor, that I had a pacemaker. She just looked at me and blinked. I’d been nervous to tell her – I’m nervous to tell everyone.

I waited for her reaction. Her expression did not change.

“I was nervous to tell you.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Isn’t it weird?”

“It’s not weird. It’s a part of you, of your history, of everything you are. What’s weird about that?”

This was the best reaction anyone has ever had to the news – most people look at me with pity, or sympathy, or humor. This girl just accepted it. Maybe she’s right – I am whole, now, every bit as much as I was when the pacemaker was installed.

But my heart, unlike hers, is assisted – it seems wrong. The rhythm of my life, tick-tocking like a metronome within my chest, is watched over by a machine. It seems unnatural. The heart should be free. Especially given all the importance placed upon the heart throughout time.

The Egyptians used to refer to the pulse as “the speaking of the heart.” Lovers sometimes put pictures of each other in heart-shaped lockets. E.E. Cummings once said to someone in a poem, “I carry your heart with me (I carry it in my heart.)” Many early cultures believed the heart was the same thing as the mind.

Maybe there is some truth to all of this – maybe, through the method of loci, we have built information, emotion and legend around the heart, until this organ could not possibly hope to live up to everything we expect of it. And those of us who live with assistance – with an artificial pacemaker – we are left grasping. My soul, the things I carry, the mind, all of it is only there because of a machine no larger than my palm. But everyone – all of us – are only here because of an organ as large as our fist. It beats in our chest, it keeps us alive.

And maybe – as long as the blood is flowing, it doesn’t matter what is causing it to flow. And the Tuscan Sea, just beyond the cliffs – maybe it’s not a reminder of death, but of how easily we can fall and how more often than not, we do not.